

REPORT

AFGHAN COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

Issues Impacting Shepparton's Afghan Community Before and After the Beginning of COVID-19

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DISCLAIMERS

This report presents the findings of Community Consultation with Greater Shepparton's Afghan community. The consultation period ended before the COVID-19 outbreak in Shepparton and the political turn of events in Afghanistan in August 2021. Therefore, this report does not reflect the impacts of the current political situation in Afghanistan and the major COVID-19 outbreak on the Afghan community in Shepparton.

The report is a snapshot of views of a small sample of the Afghan community in Shepparton at a point in time and may or may not represent the whole community's views.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of a study undertaken by the Ethnic Council Shepparton and District on the issues impacting Shepparton's Afghan community before and after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Y2020. The study was conducted via community consultation with 84 Afghan community members in Shepparton through several Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and an online survey. To do this, four cohorts of the Afghan community were selected, which included (i) Afghan Youth-18 to 25 years old (ii) Afghan Men-above 25 years old (iii) Afghan Women-above 25 years old, and (iv) Afghan Male Elders, above 60 years old and separated from their families overseas.

The consultation highlighted many common issues across all the consultation cohorts and those unique to respective cohorts. It is worth noting that in the past, similar work on the identification of problems and issues of Shepparton's Afghan community was mainly based on the feedback and perspectives of the Afghan community's male leadership. However, the current study endeavoured to incorporate an inclusive community consultation process with the Afghan community. This ensured the voices and perspectives of Afghan women and youth were included and heard during the consultation.

Overall, this report is a point in time snapshot of issues impacting the Afghan community, based in Shepparton. The community consultation also aimed to explore the participants' experiences on locally available programs and services to address the identified issues. In addition, the Focus Group Discussion participants were invited to suggest ideas on addressing the issues impacting the Afghan community in Shepparton, whether before or after the beginning of COVID-19. These discussions provided valuable insights into the gaps in the current services and programs from the perspective of Shepparton's Afghan community; their suggested solutions helped form the basis of recommendations included in this report. It is hoped that the key stakeholders and government agencies will benefit from these recommendations in providing programs, policies, and services that are more inclusive and culturally and linguistically appropriate to cater to the needs of Afghan and other ethnic communities in the Shepparton region.

Summary of key findings

The consultation reaffirmed that for Shepparton's Afghan community, the language barrier across all the four cohorts was the biggest issue, whether before or after the beginning of COVID-19. This issue has ramifications in all areas of their daily lives, in various settings and roles. For young people, it presents barriers to employment, social connections, positive school outcomes and experiences, etc. For adult men and women, the language barrier hinders their interactions with the mainstream

communities, schools, employers, service delivery organisations and agencies, etc. For Afghan elders separated from their families overseas, the language barrier adds to their social isolation, depression and inability to navigate local systems and services, e.g. legal, mental health, well-being, etc. The consultation identified a strong need for bilingual workers and language translations in all forms of service delivery and information dissemination in Shepparton.

Mental Health was another prominent topic during the consultation with all cohorts. Across all cohorts, i.e. youth, adult men and women and elders, the consultation explicitly and implicitly highlighted experiences of stress, sadness, loneliness, helplessness, distress, low self-esteem, anger, etc. It was evident that COVID-19 undoubtedly accentuated the mental health issues in the Afghan community due to many challenges following the pandemic, e.g. job losses, work from home, especially for women, online learning, travel restrictions, and social isolation, etc. The consultation also recognised that the stigma attached to acknowledging mental health-related issues in the Afghan community hinders the Afghan community from seeking necessary mental health support. Moreover, lack of ethno-specific mental health services in Shepparton, accessibility, affordability, lack of awareness of locally available programs and support, etc., also play a role in leaving these issues largely unattended.

Another issue recognised as critical by three out of four consultation cohorts (Youth, Afghan men and Afghan women) was the lack of support networks and guidance to Afghan youth in school, education, and career. The report discusses various aspects of this issue and points towards a lack of targeted and consistent support for Afghan parents and children in deciding study pathways, employment, career options, and social networks and opportunities for Afghan youth. This issue existed before COVID-19 and intensified due to challenges of COVID-19, e.g. lockdown restrictions, lack of in-person contact, etc.

The challenges of intergenerational conflict between youth and parents were apparent during discussions with majority cohorts (i.e. youth, Afghan men, and women). Afghan parents' cultural and social beliefs conflicting with their children's adaptability to the Australian way of life impacts family relationships and the overall mental and emotional well-being of parents and their children. The consultation identified the need for culturally and linguistically appropriate parenting support programs tailored to the Afghan community's needs. A need for cultural and religious awareness/education programs for young people was also identified as an essential step towards addressing this conflict and promoting positive cultural identity.

The consultation also identified the issue of gender equality in Shepparton's Afghan community and shed light on significant inhibitors of women's social, educational, and economic participation. Examples of these barriers include (i) gender-based socio-cultural beliefs and stereotypes inherent within the Afghan community (ii) lack of culturally and socially safe/women-only spaces for women's participation in leisure, recreation, and sports, etc. opportunities (iii) local employers' biases towards Afghan women's modest dressing (iii) lack of affordable child care (iv) lack of adequate public transport system that

hinders women's mobility (iv) lack of formal qualification/certification and language proficiency despite having skills and talent, e.g. cooking, sewing, etc.

During the consultation with Afghan men and elders, it was apparent that the plight of those who are on Temporary Protection/Bridging visas is agonising and a concern for the whole community. Many Afghan men in Shepparton had arrived in Australia as asylum seekers/refugees and, owing to their visa status, have been unable to reunite with their families overseas; many of them have lived here for the past several years. Also, some of these men who now have a permanent residence visa cannot reunite with their families in Australia due to a very lengthy visa application processing time. COVID-19 has impacted the living conditions of these Afghan men due to added social isolation caused by the lockdown restrictions. The report suggests two main points. Firstly, any effort to lessen their distress will be incomplete unless the Australian Government allows their families to reunite with them in Australia. Secondly, a solid humanitarian lens and advocacy are needed to alleviate the sufferings of these Afghan men separated from families overseas.

The consultation also touched on Family Violence (FV) in Shepparton's Afghan community. Key insights on these issues were gained during a consultation with Afghan male leaders and a survey response from one Afghan woman respondent. The remaining participants of the consultation skimmed through the issue and chose to provide brief comments and opinions. The focus group discussion with Afghan men (community leaders) was effective in (i) their candid acknowledgement of the Family Violence issue within the community (ii) highlighting the social-cultural factors contributing toward FV (iii) recognising the need for early intervention and prevention (iv) offering their services as community leaders to work together with the relevant agencies and authorities, e.g. police, for early intervention and resolution. The report recognises that FV is a sensitive topic that needs to be dealt with specialised knowledge and expertise and is currently not within the domain of this project.

Young participants, both male and female, brought up various nuances of biases, prejudices, and racism/casual racism during the focus group discussions. The participants quoted examples of their lived experiences in Shepparton of being marginalised, discriminated against in schools and during an employment search. The consultation identified that many young people accept racism/casual racism as a part of life. The consultation with the Afghan men's cohort did not raise any particular concerns around racism. Instead, there was an appreciation for the welcoming and accepting nature of the mainstream community in Shepparton.

Overall, what has worked well for the Afghan community (before and after the beginning of COVID-19)

- Support to Afghan community from the Ethnic Council Shepparton and District
- COVID-19 information and messages from the local Council and other agencies
- COVID-19 financial support e.g. Job Keeper

- Mentoring support received by some Shepparton youth from Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) during COVID-19.
- Understanding and empathy of employers like Shepparton ELC in easing off the work from home pressure for women during COVID-19
- Support from some school teachers and student leaders to Afghan students manage language difficulties.
- Community Hub, St. Georges Road Primary School, providing support to Afghan parents in creating awareness on local services
- Public toilets in Fraser Street (in the CBD) allow breastfeeding for women in a culturally safe space.

Key recommendations for issues impacting each of the cohorts of the community consultation are outlined in their respective sections in the report. It is to be noted that for the common problems across all cohorts, there are some recommendations that apply to all cohorts and others that are unique to each cohort.

BACKGROUND

The Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District Inc. is a peak body with a mission to promote and represent the social, cultural and economic well-being of ethnic communities in the Goulburn Valley Region through the provision of quality and innovative settlement, refugee support, community development, and information and advocacy services.¹

The global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 affected and transformed many aspects of people's lives at personal, organisational, and community levels. The advent of COVID-19 witnessed the commencement of mammoth efforts by governments worldwide to respond to the challenges of the pandemic. On the one hand, this required a national, state and territorial emergency public health response to control and suppress the virus transmission in the community. On the other hand, it presented the need for governments to swiftly curtail the flow-on effects of the pandemic economic and social spheres.

At the local level in Greater Shepparton, the Ethnic Council played an active and prominent role in working with the local and state government authorities and community organisations to respond to COVID-19 challenges impacting the ethnic communities in Shepparton.

Towards late 2021 State of Victoria started to emerge out of COVID-19 (first wave) emergency response phase and transitioned into the COVID-19 recovery phase. Accordingly, it was important for Ethnic Council to provide a relevant and fit-for-purpose recovery program to Greater Shepparton's ethnic communities. Therefore, the organisation (Ethnic Council) acknowledged the need to (a) update its understanding of issues faced by local ethnic communities in pre and post COVID-19 period (b) understand the impacts of these issues in various spheres of their lives, e.g. social, economic and community (c) identify and recommend appropriate and fit for purpose programs and services for ethnic communities in the COVID-19 recovery phase.

In this context, the Ethnic Council sponsored a project in March 2021 to study issues impacting Shepparton's ethnic communities in the pre and post COVID-19 period and identify grassroots community ideas, aspirations and solutions to address these issues.

This report documents the findings of the Community Consultation with Shepparton's Afghan Community.

¹ [Strategic Purpose Statement – Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District \(ethniccouncilshepparton.com.au\)](https://www.ethniccouncilshepparton.com.au)

INTRODUCTION

Project Title

Community Consultation on issues impacting Shepparton's Afghan community before and after the beginning of COVID-19.

Client & Sponsor

Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District Inc.

Project Aims & Objectives

- To undertake community consultation with Shepparton's Afghan community and identify issues impacting these communities pre and post COVID-19.
- Prepare a set of recommendations in consultation with the community on actions that could be incorporated into a broader COVID recovery phase.

Project Scope

The overall project scope covered the following scope items:

1. Engagement and consultation with Shepparton's Afghan community to:
 - Identify issues, barriers and challenges experienced by Shepparton's Afghan community in their daily lives before and after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia in March 2020.
 - Understand community's ideas, beliefs and aspirations regarding policies, programs and solutions needed to address these issues.
2. Prepare a set of recommendations on fit-for-purpose policies, actions and programs to achieve positive (financial, education, health, social, etc.) outcomes for Shepparton's Afghan community in the post-COVID-19 period.

The basic profile of consultation cohorts

Afghan community members living in Shepparton who:

- arrived in Australia, with or without families, on humanitarian grounds (as refugees or asylum seekers)- many of them transitioned to become permanent residents and Australian citizens
- are on Temporary Protection Visa (TPV), Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) or Bridging Visas
- arrived in Australia on Permanent Residence (PR) or Partner's visa
- older Afghan men and women above the age of 25 years with limited or no English language skills and low level of literacy.

Report's Audience

Community Service Providers, Greater Shepparton City Council, Ethnic Council for Shepparton and District, Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC), other agencies and service providers, Media.

(Ethnic Council for Shepparton and District aims to provide this report to DPC and use this as the basis for advocacy for providing services and programs to support Shepparton's ethnic communities).

CONSULTATION COHORT 1: AFGHAN YOUTH (AGE GROUP: 18 YEARS TO 25 YEARS)

KEY FINDINGS

1. All key issues impacting young Afghan people in Shepparton in the pre-COVID-19 period continued or escalated in their severity after the beginning of COVID-19.
2. COVID-19 did not present an alarming rate of additional issues unknown to the community before COVID -19. However, the pandemic exacerbated most pre-existing problems such as mental health, education barriers, financial struggles, intergenerational conflicts, etc.
3. Direct COVID-19 impacts on young people included (a) difficulty in adjustment to online learning and studying (b) staying motivated (c) 'work from home' introducing new challenges to young working in juggling work, family, childcare, etc. (d) lack of support and activities for playgroup children and their families during COVID-19. These issues contributed to added mental health and stresses for young people.
4. Mental Health topic dominated the discussions and consultation with young people and was reported as demanding serious attention.
5. The manifestation of mental health issues such as depression, low mood, anger, reported by young people, has its root in multiple factors, e.g. personal, social, cultural, economic, regional liveability and government's visa policies restricting partners to joining them from overseas.
6. Other key issues confronting young people included:
 - (i) Financial struggles due to unemployment
 - (ii) Language barriers impacting social, education and economic outcomes
 - (iii) Lack of guidance, mentors, networks, connections and support for studies, transition to employment and social interactions
 - (iv) Lack of efficient and effective public transport system in Shepparton (buses, trains) that creates hurdles for young people in accessing services, social and employment opportunities
 - (v) Gender barriers for Afghan girls and young women
 - (vi) Intergenerational differences between young people and their parents in dealing with mental health issues, women's empowerment/role, type of jobs/industry suited for girls
 - (vii) Challenges of fitting in the Australian society while maintaining a close bond with their ethnic culture and traditions
 - (viii) Family Violence (FV)
 - (ix) Everyday racism

DISCUSSION

Community consultation with young people in the local Afghan community was completed through three Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and 16 online survey responses. A total of 32 young people (19 females and 13 males) provided views on key issues for young Afghan people in the pre and post COVID period. A summary of the demographic profile of participants in this cohort is included in the Annex. The consultation also included young people's perspectives on possible ways to address these problems and identify services/programs considered to help address these issues. These discussions reaffirmed the following findings of the study titled ²'Working with Multicultural Youth-Programs, strategies and future direction'.

"Organisations working with multicultural young people recognise they are not sufficiently accessing either mainstream or culturally specific support services. For refugees, it has been observed that after the initial period of settlement, many do not access the services that they require (5). When considering access to services, planning needs to address six components of accessibility: • visible accessibility (awareness of service); • physical accessibility (transport, location); • procedural accessibility (referral and registration processes); • economic accessibility (affordability); • psychological accessibility (beliefs and expectations of service users); and • cultural accessibility (language, values and behavioural norms)."

The following section presents key issues and challenges reported by the participants during the community consultation process.

1. LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Discussions with young people reinforced previously known findings that the language barrier remains the huge fundamental challenge and disadvantage for most people in Shepparton's Afghan community, particularly the newly arrived young migrant. The challenge of nil or inadequate language proficiency skills among young people inhibits their opportunities in all settings such as education, job market, mobility and social interactions with the broader community, etc.

One young participant noted that *"not being able to socialise properly in school due to language barriers made it hard for me to make friends at school and in general"*.

"Talking to the house leaders in school and class teachers here and there sort of helped me cope with the situation well without it heavily affecting my mental health", noted another participant.

² Working with Multicultural Youth: Programs, Strategies and Future Directions- Prepared by Steve Francis and Sarah Cornfoot, Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, Melbourne, Victoria For the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth October 2007

The language barrier also makes it difficult for young people to access and fully understand various essential and critical support services that they need, such as mental health services. This lack of service accessibility is accentuated due to the current situation where many service providers do not offer ethno specific programs targeting new arrival communities.

A newly arrived young Afghan woman talked about her initial language difficulties in a new country and said:

“I felt like a blind person who couldn't see the signs. I was crying; initially, it was hard, due to loneliness and language barrier.”

“Because of the language problem, I couldn't understand the bus schedule- So I went to a language school to work on my English language to improve it so that I can interact with different people”.

As a newcomer, the participants observed that not knowing the language and the inability to follow basic local street signage, parking signs, etc., adds to the isolation, exclusion, and mental stresses of young people in the community. Newly arrived young migrants in Shepparton struggle to find any support networks for guidance in their day to day needs and issues. Language barrier contributes to their lack of participation and interaction with the broader community and adds to their isolation and exclusion.

Poor English skill remains the most significant barrier to young people's participation in all aspects of the wider community.

2. EDUCATION AND CAREER TRANSITION PROBLEMS

Young people in this consultation lamented the lack of regular and consistently available support networks for directions and guidance in their education and career pathways.

Lack of clear directions for education pathways adds to their barriers *“where 95% students do not have any idea of available education programs and pathways”*, remarked one participant.

One participant said about their academic limitations: *“As a migrant, you don't get enough marks, but you should know the alternatives”*.

Many young participants noted that currently available general support to all students, such as school course coordinators, university open days, etc. “didn't do enough” to produce positive employment outcomes for them.

Key points outlined by young people are as follows:

- There is a lack of awareness among young people on what other pathways are available for them if they are not successful in getting entry into university.
- Students are expected to conform to the school services offered by schools and tertiary institutions without specific engagement or communication strategies for new arrival communities.
- Young people find it essential that their parents participate in study and career information forums. They explained that this could help parents understand what other pathways are available to their children as an alternative to farming.

One participant's view was that *"currently there is a gap between schools and families, so there is a need to open something for both, the families and students. Perhaps a network or forum outside school inclusive to Afghan parents and students"*.

- Lack of university/tertiary study subject choices in Shepparton creates further education barriers for young people in the Afghan community. Generally, Afghan parents do not allow their children to move alone to other cities for tertiary studies. In many such scenarios, they either move the whole family to Melbourne or deny their sons and daughters permission to leave home, which disadvantages young people and results in mental and emotional stresses. Those families who relocate to enable their children to attend university rarely return, which disadvantages the local community.
- Young people also feel that the local university campuses in Shepparton do not offer comparable services and social experiences. When comparing regional university campuses to Melbourne universities, one participant remarked that *"local campuses do not provide enough subject choices, better-looking campuses, cafes, and social experience"*.
- Due to their migrant/refugee background and language barriers, the information on locally available services, jobs and opportunities are not easily accessible and understandable to young people.

3. YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Young Afghan people in Shepparton encounter serious hurdles in seeking employment opportunities. This pre-existing problem was accentuated with the arrival of COVID-19. As a result of their unemployment, young people are under severe financial pressures. According to the participants of the consultation, key barriers to Afghan youth employment include:

- Lack of connections and networks to help support young people access information about locally available jobs in Shepparton.

- There is often a mismatch between Afghan parents and young people in their preferred work roles and sectors. Young people described that most parents who work on farms prefer their children to do farm work. On the contrary, young people prefer to join non-farming sectors but are limited due to a lack of information, guidance and support about other employment sectors.
- Inadequate language skills add to their employment barriers, and young people continue to struggle to find jobs outside the farming sector.
- The current ³GROW Shepparton program that matches potential employees and employers is unknown and inaccessible to many young people in the Afghan community. This lack of awareness about the GROW program is another missed opportunity for local Afghan youth in their employment search.
- The evident ineffectiveness of Centre Link's Job Active Network program in providing employment support to new arrival communities.

4. PROBLEMS WITH LOCAL PUBLIC TRANSPORT (BUSES, TRAINS)

Young people in Shepparton's Afghan community rely heavily on public transport. One of the major issues they highlighted during the consultation was difficulty moving around the town due to an inadequate local public transport system. The lack of a reliable and frequent public transport system (buses and trains) in Shepparton has created additional barriers to mobility and independence for young people. Whether looking for jobs, going to school, attending doctor's appointments, commuting to work, a less than optimal local public bus system is a major challenge facing young people.

Issues related to inadequate public bus service frequency, service unavailability on public holidays and insufficient coverage areas call for serious attention according to the young cohort of the community consultation.

One young woman expressed her frustration with local public buses saying:

"If I had a (medical) appointment, I had to think of how to get to my appointment, and it was annoying. It used to take me all day to go to my appointment and get back home."

³ GROW (Growing Regional Opportunities for Work) Greater Shepparton is a collaborative program where business, government and community organisations are supported to work together to strengthen social and economic outcomes and increase job opportunities through procurement and employment across the Goulburn Valley. Its objectives include "Create pathways for young people and long-term unemployed into sustainable employment (e.g. work readiness training, upskilling, links to industry)". Ref. GROW Greater Shepparton Regional Action Plan.

“To travel from South Shepparton to North Shepparton for School was a big problem- I was always late for classes”, said one young person.

Another participant disclosed that *“I had to beg my parents to leave me at my workplace on Sunday- because no public bus was there- that was a problem.”*

One recently arrived young Afghan female migrant said, *“We waste a lot of time because of poor bus services- doctor’s appointments do not match with the bus schedule, and we waste a lot of time in bus travel.”* She said that the situation was challenging for her- she wasted a lot of time waiting for public transports while studying and simultaneously looking for a job to satisfy Centrelink requirements.

Another transport-related issue raised by young people was less frequent, slow and unreliable train services between Shepparton and Melbourne. Young people stated that due to the low frequency of train services they were at a significant disadvantage compared to those who lived in Bendigo or Ballarat, where there were far more frequent daily services.

According to the consultation participants, this issue has disproportionately affected young Afghan women as many miss out on higher education opportunities in Melbourne. They explained that Afghan parents were generally hesitant to allow them (i.e. the daughters) to live in Melbourne, away from home, for attending university. This lack of a frequent and faster train system has created barriers for Afghan women to obtaining higher education in many instances.

Lack of an efficient public train system was identified as one of the main reasons many young Afghan women had to give up on their aspirations of tertiary education in Melbourne.

“When parents didn’t allow them to live in Melbourne, lot of girls dropped university education because of the train timetable that did not enable them to make a day trip to Melbourne to attend university lectures”.

In some cases, whole families would relocate to Melbourne to enable their daughters to participate in tertiary education. This solved the education issue however, young women were dislocated from their extended family and friends in Shepparton.

Young women participating in this discussion revealed their experiences of sadness, low self-esteem and disappointments when confronted with this barrier to their education.

5. GENDER BARRIERS

During the consultation, young people identified several areas where young women experience gender barriers and are marginalised. Several elements, including the socio-cultural factors, play a role in determining opportunities and choices in life for young Afghan women, as explained by some

participants. The young female participants cited examples of missed opportunities due to their gender as below:

Sports and active living opportunities

Young Afghan women in this consultation expressed their strong desire to engage in sports and other fitness opportunities in a culturally safe and appropriate environment.

They explained that the absence of affordable women's only areas in Shepparton to participate in outdoor sports, indoor aquatic and leisure activities, and other health and fitness programs is a barrier that affects their health and overall well-being.

"I have too much energy but don't know what to do, where to spend that energy", said a young Afghan woman.

Young women pointed out that there were very few opportunities to participate in non-competitive sports like soccer, badminton and swimming in culturally safe and appropriate settings. They informed that some programs (like soccer in the Park) started at one point, but then they ended and did not continue on an ongoing basis. Their experience was that locally, there were not many women's only sports opportunities that ran consistently and continuously. Most programs are ad-hoc, as highlighted by a young woman; *"we started our soccer, but now it has stopped.*

Education

As discussed in the previous sections, young people said that parents were reluctant to allow their children, particularly girls, to independently live and study in Melbourne or other cities due to their family traditions. Often the permission granted to their sons to stay away from home for studies is not extended to daughters. Sometimes girls have to take gap years of more than one year or more until they find another girl to accompany them to move to another town for studies.

One young person reflecting on her own experience said, *"This can impact women's motivations when waiting for a couple of years to resume studies, and they can start having self-doubt".*

Employment barriers

Consultation participants communicated that young Afghan women were not allowed by their parents to work in specific workplaces and sectors, e.g. hospitality. The main reason for this reluctance is that Afghan parents do not consider it safe and culturally appropriate for young women to work night shifts at cafes, restaurants, fast food, etc.

Moreover, some local businesses' racism and unconscious biases, (e.g. by hair salons) towards Afghan women in the past, have added to this complexity. These experiences have not helped Afghan parents

build trust and confidence in allowing their daughters to work in settings such as hospitality, hair salons, or jobs requiring late-night shifts.

Intergenerational gap

Despite the gender barriers, as mentioned above, this consultation revealed that many young Afghan men acknowledge the importance of gender equality and are taking initiatives to remove some gender barriers for girls and women in their community. This situation also creates a conflict between Afghan parents and young people.

A young male participant described, *"I have tried to explain to them (parents) about women's empowerment, women to be independent, they think I am losing my culture"*.

The participants highlighted that girls and boys are working well together in the newly formed Young Afghan GV Association because there is a mix of girls and boys. *"If there are more boys than girls, then probably it won't be helpful"*, noted a young Afghan female member of the Association.

During the consultation, a young male community leader proclaimed:

"I have changed my views about girls in my generation- all my sisters are working, educated. I don't differentiate between girls and boys. I have a mixed group of girls and boys in my group. There is awareness of gender equality. Everything we do (in the Association), we select a girl and a boy."

6. MENTAL HEALTH

One of the most commonly cited issues by young people in this community consultation was mental health and the lack of support and services available to the local Afghan community to address this issue. It was noted that mental health issues are prevalent in the local Afghan community. These issues were escalated with COVID-19 to the extent that some young people had to consult with doctors to overcome their mental health issues.

According to the young people in this consultation, mental health issues within the community were very noticeable after COVID-19 started when many young people began disengaging with family and friends. They outlined the barriers to addressing mental health as below:

Lack of awareness around local mental health services

According to the consultation participants, young Afghan people find it very difficult to navigate the system and access local services and support for mental health issues. One participant said:

“We have been here for 12 years or so, but we are still new and not adequately informed about mental health support services.”

Young people from refugee/migrant backgrounds observe that mental health service providers rarely engage an interpreter to address the language barriers.

Affordability

The financial costs involved in receiving mental health support is often a significant consideration for young people. Affordability is a crucial factor for young people seeking mental health support. During the discussions, a young woman revealed:

“I have never reached out to any of the (mental health) support services – I have just dealt with it myself mainly because of financial reasons...I just got over it with time.”

Stigma and denial

Young people in this consultation said that they feel that parents’ education and awareness of mental health is critically needed. According to them, Afghan parents believe that by speaking about mental health issues, “people might think less of them”. As a result, they don’t seek mental health support.

Young people are adaptable, but parents need that awareness, noted one young participant.

“Some kids/parents don't even realise that mental health issues are affecting them.”

Participants emphasised that there is a stigma about mental health in the community. The ‘crazy or demented’ label is associated with those who show signs of mental health issues, e.g. stress, depression, withdrawal behaviour, etc.

“When we have stress, we become depressed, we don't express-but when older people have stress, they become aggressive”.

Young people believe that many men in their community, without their knowing and accepting, are experiencing mental health issues as they are evidently disengaged from the community.

The participants praised the local Community Hub (St. Georges Road Primary School) in Shepparton that has initiated a new service for families of children enrolled in the school to introduce them to local services such as hospitals, ambulances, etc. This model is working well according to the young participants of the consultation.

A gap in cultural understanding of the Service Providers

The participants highlighted the inability of current mental health service providers to delve deeper into the problem and its solutions for the refugee and new arrival migrant community. They emphasised that the local service providers need to have a better cultural understanding of the (Afghan) community when offering mental health services. Without this understanding, any support provided will not have the desired outcome. They noted that trust between the community and the service provider is also necessary for positive interactions and outcomes.

Government visa policies

The current wait for the partner's visa category is too long (more than three years). This situation is a source of anxiety and stress for young people (both men and women) waiting for their partners to join them from overseas. Participants highlighted that many young women with children in Shepparton's Afghan community have to raise their children as single mothers, which is logistically and emotionally challenging. Those without children are grappling with loneliness, depression and mental health issues while living away from their partners.

One young woman participant waiting for her husband's visa application processing for more than three years expressed her despair: *"I feel nobody is listening- I just get asked to wait-nobody is listening"*. The extraordinary delay in processing a partner's visa application affects many young women in the local Afghan community and impacts their mental and emotional well-being.

7. EARLY CHILDHOOD SUPPORT

Young women involved in this consultation raised the lack of activities and information for playgroup children and their families in the Afghan community. They highlighted the need for more playgroup families and children programs in a culturally and linguistically supportive environment. This was another area where COVID-19 impact was felt during the lockdown, with few activities available for young families and their children.

8. FAMILY VIOLENCE (FV)

During the discussions, young participants in this cohort touched on the issue of Family Violence very briefly. Their expressed views on this topic were limited to acknowledging the problem existing in the local Afghan community. They, however, noted that a recent incident of Family Violence involving a young couple in their community that captured media attention was confronting and alarming. The participants believed that education for parents/adults on the benefits of women's empowerment was necessary to address this issue.

9. INTERGENERATIONAL GAPS AND CONFLICTS WITH PARENTS

Young people also raised their dilemma of 'fitting in' the Australian society that could create conflicts with their traditional upbringing and parents' expectations. The challenge of integrating into the mainstream community while maintaining their cultural norms and traditions can cause stress, confusion and loss of identity.

This issue resonated strongly with the following findings of the well-researched report. 4“Working with Multicultural Youth Programs, strategies and future directions”:

“Second-generation young people in particular often suffer from a crisis of identity as they “live between two cultures”. Often the parents of second-generation young people will emphasise the need to learn the cultural norms, values and rituals of their country of origin, a place to which many of these young people have never visited. At the same time, the expectation of peers and young people themselves to integrate into mainstream Australian culture and exhibit local norms of behaviour are strong and ever present. As a result of these opposing factors, second generation young people can become confused, despondent and in some cases reject or deny their cultural heritage”.

During the consultation, some young participants also expressed their desire to maintain strong links with their culture and religion and to be able to receive information and education within the community setting. They stated that currently, there are not enough opportunities locally to learn their language and develop a deeper understanding of their religion and socio-cultural beliefs and traditions.

10. LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR CULTURAL/RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES:

During the consultation, many young people lamented the lack of safe and inclusive spaces/hubs for young people from Afghan and other multicultural communities. According to the participants, young Afghan people preferred social spaces where they could communicate in their first language, so they do not come across as excluding others from the non-Afghan/mainstream community.

Some young leaders expressed their keenness to participate in mainstream community activities and connect with other community members. At present, they are inhibited by barriers such as their lack of knowledge of getting involved in local activities, organising events, filling grant applications, and representing their community in events like ANZAC Day.

When highlighting the need for guidance and support, one participant emphasised that *“having support groups for all age groups and genders is needed. If there was or is any, it should be advertised because I haven't come across any”.*

11. RACISM

On the issue of racism, young people shared their opinion that racism exists, and no matter what one does, it can't be eliminated.

⁴ Report prepared by Steve Francis and Sarah Cornfoot, Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues, Melbourne, Victoria For the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth October 2007

One young woman during the discussions remarked that *“I have conditioned myself to everyday racism.”*

Some young participants shared their experience of witnessing schoolyard fights between students from a CALD (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse) background and the mainstream community. They disclosed that on such occasions, students from CALD communities felt pressured/obliged to support and side with CALD groups regardless of the reason behind the fight. They also noted that these school fight incidents had escalated after amalgamating local Secondary Schools into one school. Some participants described the situations when some teachers effectively separated the conflicting groups to minimise the risk of school fights. However, when teachers supported or sided with non-multicultural students, it created a feeling of resentment for favouritism, discrimination and racism against multicultural students.

12. IMPACT OF COVID-19 (COHORT 1: AFGHAN YOUTH)

The consultation with young Afghan people identified the following COVID-19 issues and their impacts:

Financial

COVID-19 added to the financial struggles of young people and, as a result, impacted their overall health, particularly mental health.

Many young workers lost their jobs or had their working hours reduced. Those who did not have a job found it harder to find work as many companies stopped hiring new staff. The outcome was that young people struggled to afford their basic needs.

One young migrant disclosed, *“My brother had to sell his car because he couldn’t afford to pay for car insurance, rent, etc.”*

The participants also acknowledged the benefit of the Federal Government’s Job Keeper program, which helped them financially. Young people on the Job Seeker program also appreciated the supplement COVID financial allowance during that period.

Employment Search

To find work during COVID-19, young people resorted to various options such as (i) searching different websites such as seek.com, (ii) using social media as a tool to look for employment opportunities (iii) visiting in person to business for jobs. These efforts, however, yielded limited success as many companies were not hiring during COVID-19.

One Study participant joined CMY (Centre for Multicultural Youth), where they provided him with a Mentor to help. This worked well for the young person.

Social and recreational activities

The participants of this consultation highlighted that due to COVID-19 lockdowns, there were no opportunities for physical activities, limited socialisation and interactions with friends, inability to visit a gym for fitness and health. During this time, young people mainly relied on social media to stay in touch with their friends.

COVID-19 also affected playgroup children and their families as there were not many activities and programs that they could join.

Education:

For some students staying motivated and keeping up with studies became significantly challenging during COVID-19. One young participant contributed:

“Not being able to go to the university physically made me lazy and demotivated. “Furthermore, it initially had a great impact on my grades, which further demotivated”.

“Not being able to interact with my friends and socialising in general affected me personally, making me more introverted”, another participant noted.

A general observation was that COVID-19 affected many people as “young people were on the screen all the time”.

The experience of some participants suggested that online classes were difficult to adjust to in the beginning, but later they adapted to that. Some young people also felt challenged due to problems with online courses.

Work from Home

Young women in the consultation described their experience of working from home during COVID-19 as challenging. One participant explained that *“when husband and kids were also home, I was distracted and was unable to focus on work. My employer allowed me to return to the worksite and do online teaching from the campus. It was beneficial for my mental health. I could see other people.”*

Mental Health

The consultation participants reported that it was stressing that they couldn't see their family members and friends. COVID-19 affected multiple aspects of young people's lives, as noted in the above sections. The result was a notable escalation of mental health issues, sadness, anxiety, depression, distress in the local Afghan community. The barriers to accessing mental health support in the pre-COVID-19 period only compounded the severity of the issue in the post-COVID-19 period.

COVID-19 information messaging

Young people expressed their satisfaction with the messaging of COVID-19 safety information.

“I think it was handled well by the council and government services in sending their messages across the community by posters and social media videos that were translated in different languages”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(CONSULTATION COHORT 1: AFGHAN YOUTH)

These recommendations are based on the discussions with young people from the Afghan community during the community consultation. Their views and feedback have informed the following recommendations to address issues and barriers, before and after the beginning of COVID-19, faced by young people in Shepparton's Afghan community.

RECOMMENDATION 1

i. Establish (Migrant/Multicultural) Youth Employment Hub

Removing current employment barriers for young people from migrant/refugee backgrounds will positively affect these individuals and the whole community. This community consultation has highlighted the need for substantial support for young people in the Afghan community in identifying employment pathways. Therefore, a go-to-place or a multicultural youth employment hub for young people to receive one-to-one guidance, support, direction, and mentoring in navigating their employment path is strongly recommended.

This initiative will enable young people to evolve into happy, confident, financially empowered, and productive community members.

It is recommended that the Ethnic Council and other community organisations should actively explore funding opportunities for this initiative. Any such initiative should also consider the language needs of the young people.

ii. Promote GROW Shepparton Program for youth

Government should provide resources to the GROW Shepparton program to develop its outreach program for Afghan/multicultural youth. This program should be widely promoted among Afghan youth. Suggested actions for the GROW program include (i) designing appropriate workshops and information sessions for youth (ii) having bilingual support staff for young people from the Afghan community (iii) engagement with Afghan youth forums, e.g. GV Afghan Young Association, Greater Shepparton Secondary College (GSSC), Greater Shepparton Youth Committee (iv) promotion of GROW services to parents through Afghan community leaders (v) enhanced collaboration with the Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District. (vi) exploring opportunities for GROW to develop collaborative relationships with community organisations and help develop employment pathways for youth from Afghan and other multicultural communities.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Establish multicultural social enterprise such as Young People's Coffee Shop

Opportunities to establish a culturally and socially safe space for young people to be run by young people should be actively explored. An example could be a Coffee Shop set on a social enterprise

model. These initiatives will result in positive social and economic outcomes for young people from Afghan and other multicultural communities, such as, employment opportunities for young people, development of entrepreneurial skills among young people, a safe space for young people to socialise, social cohesion and well-being, etc. This initiative will need appropriate resources and a lead organisation/community group to facilitate and champion the execution of this concept.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Establish culturally and linguistically appropriate multicultural Youth Support Program

This includes a program/service such as providing a mentor or a go-to person to support and guide young Afghan people, especially new arrivals. The program should help Afghan youth build their networks and get involved in broader community activities, such as volunteering, sports, and other community engagement opportunities. etc.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Establish a Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) branch in Shepparton

CMY works closely with multicultural youth and has well-established programs and resources to support youth in education, employment, health and well-being, strategies to deal with racism, having a voice, etc. ⁵*“The Centre for Multicultural Youth is a not-for-profit organisation based in Victoria, providing specialist knowledge and support to young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds”.*

The presence of CMY or a similar multicultural youth-focused organisation to address the issues experienced by multicultural youth is highly recommended in Shepparton. This setup has an excellent opportunity to collaborate and partner with the existing local youth agencies and leverage the sector knowledge and resources.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Establish Afghan Parent-Student Education Support Network (within or outside School)

High school students and their parents need information about a wide range of study and work options (outside the farming/agriculture sector). Young people need extra support to identify their education and career pathways. They also require their families/parents to have this information and be part of the process. Due to language barriers, Afghan parents with limited language skills cannot comprehend information received from the existing school-based student support programs. The recommended support network should include bilingual workers/language interpreters who can help alleviate parents' concerns about specific study/career pathways that they are reluctant for their children to join, especially daughters.

⁵ CMY Website: [Centre for Multicultural Youth - Centre For Multicultural Youth \(cmymy.net.au\)](http://cmymy.net.au)

Establishing support networks inclusive of students' families will help fill the current gap between schools and families of young Afghan students while providing them with the correct information to pursue further studies and work.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Provide support to young migrants to improve their language skills through a Buddy Program

The language barrier is one of the key factors that limit the social inclusion of newly arrived young migrants in the community. It has been recognised that in addition to the existing class-based English Learning methods, more regular and frequent opportunities for young people to speak English in real-life settings is also vital. This will help enhance their language and social skills while adjusting to the new life.

A well run Buddy Program (potentially volunteer-based) to match a local English speaking community member with a new young migrant will have twofold benefits. First, young people will get an opportunity to practise their English. Second, at the same time, they will get a chance to engage with the broader community, learn about local services, social events and other areas of common interest.

RECOMMENDATION 7

- i. Advocate for an efficient and reliable public transport system/network and provide interim community-based solutions for this problem**
- ii. Provide public transport timetable in multiple languages, both in text and audio, so it is easy to understand**

Young people's access to health services, education, employment and social opportunities, etc., is hugely reliant on affordable and reliable public transport options. A well-covered, frequent and reliable public transport network (buses and trains) in Shepparton is imperative to address the current inequities faced by migrant youth. A long-term solution to the existing public transport problem in Shepparton is critical. In the short/medium term, opportunities for community-based transport services should be explored.

It is equally important to have public transport timetable in languages understood by those from non-English speaking backgrounds. It is recommended that timetable translation in other languages and formats, e.g. audio and text-based information, be available for all public transport services.

Lack of an efficient Public Transport Network is a known issue, and many residents on different community platforms have raised it. Currently, a school bus service review is underway in Shepparton. It is expected to be extended to an overall Public Transport Victoria, PTV Bus network review. It is recommended that this issue be revisited once the PTV Bus Network Review report is publicly available.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Develop community-based solutions to provide fit for purpose Mental Health Services to the Afghan migrant/refugee community

The solutions should include the following services:

Professional Services

(A regular and permanent program instead of temporary and one-off services)

- i. Run targeted information sessions for everyone, especially older people in the Afghan community, to help remove the current stigma associated with seeking Mental Health support.
- ii. Address affordability issue in seeking mental health support- Consider community care model /free counselling services for young people from a refugee background.
- iii. Design and provide Mental Health support services around the needs of the migrant community, taking into account their language, financial, social and cultural factors.
- iv. Mental Health awareness programs provided by local service providers, Ethnic Council, GV Health, etc., must include storytelling by Afghan people from within the community so that the message becomes more relatable and understandable.
- v. Establish tailor-made programs and services for Afghan youth and enable young people to access these programs. Examples include (i) Outreach services offered by Bridge Youth Services, (ii) local outreach support with cars to bring young people needing mental health support to their service centres and (iii) Headspace Youth Access teams program to provide free walk-in support for young people.

Social services and community infrastructure

- i. Council/Community groups to provide affordable health and fitness (active living) opportunities to women in a culturally appropriate and inclusive environment (e.g. women's only sports area and women's soccer, netball, teams)
- ii. Engage young people with the broader community through sports and other recreational programs. Introduce new arrivals to the local community through these programs.
- iii. Establish a youth hub for young Afghan/multicultural people to engage in recreational and social activities in culturally safe spaces.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Address gender barriers for young Afghan women

Provide support to young Afghan women that positively impact their social inclusion, health and well-being outcomes in different spheres of life such as education, work, sports, family life.

- Develop culturally and linguistically appropriate programs for creating awareness among parents, partners, and other family members on the importance of women’s education and personal/professional development.
- Involve/get the buy-in of male and female Afghan community leaders in these programs.
- Develop support programs for young Afghan women to gain confidence and enhance their active participation in civic life, e.g. A Buddy Program (as stated earlier) to help them improve their language skills and navigate local services and mainstream community.
- Provide opportunities to Afghan women to participate in sports, aquatic and leisure activities in women's only settings (local sporting clubs and council-run programs to be inclusive of women's only opportunities).
- Start a dialogue with the Shepparton Chamber of Commerce to play a role in encouraging local businesses, especially in hospitality and hairdressing sectors, to have inclusive hiring practices for migrant and refugee women.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Promote positive cultural identity and provide coaching and information opportunities to young Afghan people

The report recommends the following opportunities for young Afghan people in Shepparton:

- Dari language classes to develop reading/writing/speaking skills in Dari
- Participation in religious and cultural awareness programs designed for young people
- Awards and promotion of multicultural young people’s leadership to positively highlight their culture and valuable contribution to the community

RECOMMENDATION 11

Provide enhanced early learning support to children and families from Afghan and other migrant communities (during and outside COVID lockdowns)

Resources should be provided for online and onsite programs run by the existing community hubs at St. Georges Road School, Wilmot Road School and Gowrie Street School.

RECOMMENDATION 12

The education department should tackle racism in schools using explicit strategies

Mandatory cultural competency and awareness training should be provided across the board to teachers/staff and students.

Local schools should also develop explicit engagement strategies to engage and communicate with parents and students from diverse cultural backgrounds. These strategies should consider the need for language translation for all communications between parents and students from the Afghan community.

RECOMMENDATION 13

Awareness and education programs should be provided to young people to approach the issue of Family Violence with responsibility and cultural sensitivity

- Engage young Afghan people through workshops and forums to raise awareness on the issue of Family/Family Violence
- Organise targeted training programs for young people from the Afghan community with speakers from non-English speaking communities on topics of Gender Equality, Respectful Relationships, Preventive and Corrective actions on FV, etc.
- Launch a program for 'Young Champions for Change' to promote positive behaviours and influence in Respectful Relationships
- Seek support from existing Family Violence service providers to deliver more culturally inclusive programs

CONSULTATION COHORT 2: AFGHAN WOMEN (AGE GROUP: ABOVE 25 YEARS OLD)

KEY FINDINGS

1. Afghan women in this age group experience substantial challenges and barriers in their daily lives due to limited English language skills.
2. There are barriers to women's participation in healthy and recreational activities such as swimming, yoga in the water, aerobics, soccer, etc., due to the lack of affordable programs operating in culturally appropriate and safe settings.
3. Women in Shepparton's Afghan community lack awareness of locally available services and programs for women's well-being, mental health, NDIS, etc.
4. Information on opportunities for community-based social activities and events, e.g. Activities in the Park, does not reach a large segment of this cohort. Local service providers and event organisers do not publicise activities or events in languages other than English, resulting in missed opportunities for Afghan women.
5. Afghan women experience parenting challenges of varied nature such as (i) a rising gap between Afghan parents and their children due to intergenerational conflicts in beliefs, traditions and ideologies (ii) feeling of failure in supporting their children in studies, work and career choices due to their limited English proficiency and inability to navigate the local school system and job markets (iii) lack of play areas and activities in Shepparton for their young/teenage children.
6. Afghan women in Shepparton face disproportionate employment barriers compared to their male counterparts. This is mainly due to the perceived biases and racist behaviours (especially in local hospitality and hairdressing sectors) towards their modest dressing and hijabs.
7. The high cost of childcare excludes Afghan women with young children from opportunities for learning, work, fitness activities and social interactions.
8. Elderly Afghan women in Shepparton suffer from isolation due to a lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate socialising opportunities and activities available to them locally.
9. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Family Violence (FV) exists in the community; however, there is stigma and hesitancy to talk about FV issues. The absence of information and guidance accessible to Afghan women on family laws leaves them unprepared and vulnerable in FV

situations. Systems are complex, and almost always, communication is delivered in English, putting the women at an enormous disadvantage.

10. Inadequate and unsafe local Public Transport/Bus System has impacted Afghan women's mobility and independence.
11. COVID-19 impacts on women in the Afghan community in Shepparton included:
 - i. isolation, lack of socialising opportunities
 - ii. challenges of children's home learning, loss of employment, loss of income resulting in unaffordability of food and electricity bills
 - iii. stigma to seek financial assistance and support to reduce food insecurity
 - iv. visible mental stresses and inaction/inability to seek necessary support

DISCUSSION

A total of 16 women above the age of 25 years participated in the community consultation with this cohort in five different settings. These included three face to face FGD sessions, one zoom FGD session, one online response and one electronic survey response. All FGDs were run mainly with the help of interpreters. During these sessions, women with working English language skills were encouraged to converse in English and to not rely on the interpreter. The age group of women participants in this cohort was spread over the 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60. None of the women participants was living alone. (All of them lived with their partners, children, mother/parents or siblings). Most of them were housewives, and all were born overseas in Afghanistan. Occupation data breakdown of women participants in this cohort showed three part-time workers, three full-time workers, eight housewives and two students. The data on their marital status was not collected, so desegregation of data, e.g. single, married, divorced or separated, was not available and consequently, any corresponding analysis was not possible. A summary of the demographic profile of participants in this cohort is included in the Annex. During the consultation, this cohort of Afghan women identified the following key issues impacting the Afghan community in Shepparton:

1. LANGUAGE BARRIER

The language barrier was identified as the root cause of many disadvantages experienced by Afghan women in Shepparton. The impact of this barrier, according to women, was manifested in various ways, such as:

Parent-child role reversal

Women participants stated that due to their minimum or nil English language skills, mothers/parents have to rely on their children for interpretation in day to day activities. In doing so, "*children take charge of guiding their parents*", said one participant. Women conceded worrying reversal of roles between parents and their children was emerging due to this situation where parents felt less in control of their

lives and roles as a parent. Another concerning aspect of this role reversal is the enormous pressure placed on children to be the messenger/communicator between parents and others in a range of settings, e.g. hospital, school, shopping, sports, etc.

The gap between parents and children

During the consultation, women indicated that many young Afghan children were not proficient in their first language. This language barrier between parents and children created a gap between them as the parents were not well versed in English. During the FGD sessions, some women participants lamented that this lack of communication and understanding had led to issues within the families. They highlighted that there was currently minimum support available for Afghan children to learn their first language; community volunteers with limited resources mainly organised the locally run Dari language programs. Women in this cohort emphasised a need for well-run Dari Language Classes for their children to communicate effectively with their parents and address the current gap between parents and children.

Inability to participate and support children in studies, work, career decisions

According to some women, parents' involvement in their children's lives was limited due to their language disadvantages.

During the discussions, women participants expressed their frustration at the inability to support their children in high school education. Often parents did not have enough information or felt that their voices (complaints and reservations) were not heard by the schools on issues faced by their children.

Women in this cohort also identified a problem with the language interpretation services currently in place. They critiqued that on most occasions, the hired interpreters from Melbourne did not have Dari skills or were not proficient in the dialect predominantly used by the Afghan community in Shepparton. Due to these mismatched interpretation services, many Afghan parents could not participate effectively in PTI (Parent-Teacher Interview) meetings.

The participants emphasised that there was a need for Dari language interpreters for Shepparton's Afghan community. The unavailability of Dari interpreters results in parents missing out on participating in the PTI meeting. Currently, there is only one accredited interpreter based locally in Shepparton. For a community of approximately 1800 people, this is not enough. Furthermore, many families are hesitant to use a local person as an interpreter due to privacy concerns.

Another consequence of the language barrier for parents was their inability to participate in decisions about their children's education and career path. In Afghan family traditions, parents have a crucial role in deciding about job options for their children. During the focus group discussions, women said they needed to ensure cultural appropriateness of the work roles/workplace for their children as parents. In this context, some participants highlighted that if their daughters wanted to join the police or other careers, parents wanted to be satisfied that the workplace offered prayer rooms, halal food, etc. For

these reasons, it is considered necessary for parents to participate in employment information sessions for their children and benefit from the information provided during these sessions. Women participants reflected on their inability to participate in these important discussions due to language barriers contributing to their parenting challenges. They emphasised a need for these information sessions to be available in a language that the parents understood.

Access to information on services and support

Most women during the FGD sessions conceded that they felt they did not have sufficient information and awareness about what was available locally and how to access many of these services and programs. They acknowledged that the regular information channels such as local newspapers, news, websites, social media were not used by most Afghan women (and men).

Moreover, even if the information was available in their first language, many Afghan women in the community did not have literacy skills in their first language. Therefore, Afghan women in this cohort were largely unable to benefit from the text-based information shared through various channels. Women participants stressed that the best way of communicating information to them was via audio/video platform. A case in point was the audio COVID-19 health/information messages shared with Afghan community networks by Uniting Care last year during the pandemic.

2. BARRIERS TO LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The discussions with this cohort highlighted that Afghan women with young children, language barriers, and financial and affordability issues feel excluded from community activities, events, and learning opportunities.

A concern was raised that women often have to discontinue their English language learning classes once they have children due to additional housework, breastfeeding requirement, and, more importantly, their inability to pay for childcare expenses.

Another related learning problem reported by some women was dissatisfaction with the current English language learning program at GOTAFE. The participants stated that the current program ran in a setting where men and women from all age groups were grouped in the same class. The varied learning capacity of the group where “18-year-old women are grouped in the same class as much older men, e.g. 60 years old or so”, results in their lack of interest and motivation to participate and learn. This, in turn, contributes to their slow progress in English language skill development.

3. EMPLOYMENT

The consultation with Afghan women in this cohort reaffirmed that women's economic and employment engagement in this cohort was significantly low. There were various factors responsible for this trend, and some of them were identified as below:

Lack of employment support networks

Some women participants felt that the local job network agencies/staff linked to the Centrelink Office were not adequately trained to support newly arrived migrants to find jobs. Afghan women in this cohort emphasised the need for enhanced and tailored support to find employment opportunities and be successfully employed. *“The inability to find work results in loss of confidence and hope”*, described one woman during the consultation.

Unconscious bias and racism

During the consultation, women reported that employment barriers for Afghan women in Shepparton were higher compared to men due to local employers' biases and discrimination aimed at their modest dressing. This was mainly the case in local hospitality and hairdressing sectors.

When describing this problem, one woman exclaimed, *“I had difficulties finding employment in any careers in Greater Shepparton. I lost my confidence looking for work as a Muslim woman wearing Hijab which I felt might be the reason!”*

Women participants explained that many Afghan parents did not perceive hospitality and hairdressing related jobs as appropriate for their daughters due to socio-cultural reasons. Often Afghan women have to convince their parents to join these sectors. However, after crossing these domestic barriers, some Afghan girls had found themselves in situations where the job offer was made conditional on removing their hijabs (head covering), resulting in missing the employment opportunity.

Socio-cultural factors

As noted in previous sections, the consultation with various groups highlighted that Afghan parents have a key role in deciding the type of work roles their children, especially daughters, are allowed to take up. For instance, when young women desire to join the police force, parents need information about various aspects of the place of work for their daughters, e.g. accessibility to the prayer room, halal food, etc. Providing them with this information increases the prospects of young women to obtain their parents' permission to get employed in those areas. Conversely, not having this information contributes to their employment barriers. During the discussions, women pointed out that as parents, they wanted to be apprised of the potential workplace conditions to make informed decisions work choices for their daughters and sons.

Language barriers

It was evident from the FGDs with women that even though many Afghan women have skills that they can put to work, they cannot practice these skills due to the language barrier and lack of formal qualification. It was discussed that there were many women in the local Afghan community with sewing, cooking, crafts making skills, but despite being interested in utilising these skills, they could not find opportunities to do so. This situation impacts women's lives in different ways, e.g. lack of earning power,

financial dependence, and inability to keep themselves busy in a productive way, affecting their confidence, self-esteem, and well-being.

4. PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS AND ACTIVE LIVING

During the FGDs, women showed their strong desire and awareness of the importance of engaging in healthy living activities and sports. They understood that participating in healthy activities could help them look after their overall physical and mental well-being and provide them opportunities for social interactions with other women. Afghan women participants highlighted that their current inability to participate actively in sports and active living was due to several factors such as lack of women-only spaces and facilities, affordability, accessibility, and lack of information on locally available opportunities. They noted that except for the local Council's 'This Girl Can' monthly swimming program, very few sports and active living programs targeted multicultural women, let alone Afghan women.

Women participants expressed the need for women-only, safe and culturally appropriate local spaces to participate in active living programs and sports. They expressed a strong desire to participate in aerobics, swimming, yoga in the water, non-competitive soccer games, etc. They were also disappointed in the lack of affordable and accessible options to engage in such activities.

The consultation also identified that the locally available women-only swimming sessions and fitness facilities currently run by the private sector were considered too expensive by Afghan women in this cohort. The women participants also noted that the monthly women-only swimming sessions offered by the local Council did not provide enough value and incentive to women to build a regular healthy, and active routine. During one focus group discussion, women participants described that as most of them had back pain issues, it would help if they could do light exercise and swim in a gym. The barrier is the lack of affordable and women-only spaces in local gyms and swimming centres.

The study also revealed that many women lacked information on locally available active living programs such as the one run by the local Council. This is mainly because most of the programs are only advertised in English and through communication platforms, e.g. Council's Facebook, website, etc., that Afghan women do not commonly access. This consultation confirmed that local service providers do not necessarily consider how Afghan or other emerging/new arrival communities access information when promoting their services.

5. NEEDS OF ELDERLY PARENTS

The consultation with the Afghan women's cohort also shed light on the predicament of elderly Afghan parents, especially older women in the community who were dependent on their children and other family members. This dependence is in a range of areas, e.g. transport, language interpretation, social connectedness, etc. It was pointed out that the lack of affordable, accessible and culturally aligned social activities for elderly Afghan parents in Shepparton contributes to their loneliness, isolation and

affects their mental health and well-being. One single mother living with her old mother was particularly concerned and described her mother's situation in these words:

"My mother was at home all the time, isolated and suffering from depression".

6. FAMILY VIOLENCE

During the consultation, most women in this cohort dispelled the idea about any significant family violence or relationship problems that may have existed in the community. Women participants did not choose to identify relationship issues leading to Family Violence as one of the critical issues in their community. When asked specifically, the participants opted not to divulge in this area. However, one participant's experience was different. Her survey response disclosed that:

"Living in Australia, I had more difficulties in my marriage life and faced family violence at my home in Greater Shepparton. This impacted my young children; my mother and myself felt low mood, stressed and witnessed family violence every day, as we felt my ex-husband would not accept to change his behaviour. I faced conflicts in our own and Australian cultures and law".

This participant pointed out that she felt confused and did not know about counselling services and Australian law. Consequently, she had to cope with her ex-husband's violent behaviour at home for a few years until it got to a dangerous point when she called the police for his assault.

7. MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

When discussing mental health, a woman participant admitted that even before COVID-19, she and her other family members were going through mental health-related problems due to her relationship issues. COVID-19 further contributed to the severity and increased visibility of mental stresses in the community. One participant revealed:

"My mother's depression got worse every day so did my mental mood; I felt hopeless finding some cultural, social activities for my mum to get socialised in Greater Shepparton. It depended on my mum's mood, but sometimes she participated in the community Hub's migrant programs at Gowrie St Primary School in Shepparton but soon the program and the community Hub Leader changed which were designed mostly for the school parents' participation. GP and Counsellors were not trained enough so my mum didn't change her mind getting out of home and still was isolated at home."

8. LACK OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

Another important issue highlighted by women in this cohort was the need for their young children to engage in healthy and non-gadget related activities outside school hours, after school and on weekends and public holidays. Some lamented that many of the available after-school activities were currently expensive and not affordable to parents. These women expressed their strong desire to see their children participate in after school activities club with sports, drawing, karate, etc.

The women participants also felt that there were not enough outdoor play areas for children in Shepparton. They acknowledged that the Shepparton Park Lake had many activities organised in the Park. However, the family area lacked adequate play equipment, due to which there was always a long queue for children waiting for their turn on the play equipment. Overall, this group of women identified the need for more affordable and accessible physical activities for their children.

9. INADEQUATE PUBLIC TRANSPORT SYSTEM

Women participants in the focus group sessions expressed an urgent and strong need for safe and efficient local public transport to move around safely, independently and conveniently. According to them, there was dissatisfaction with the current bus network in Shepparton that was inadequate and unsafe.

As expressed by one participant: *"They smoke, drink inside buses"*.

Lack of an efficient public transport system was highlighted as a key barrier to women in all spheres of their daily lives- learning, employment, social connectedness, health and well-being. Their inability to drive a car and reliance on inefficient Public Transport Systems were cited as barriers to their independence, mobility and access to services.

10. CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

During the focus group discussions, women with young children expressed their feeling of being unheard and excluded from many social, learning, employment and community engagement activities. According to the women who participated in this consultation, their inability to leave their young children at home or arrange childcare that was accessible and affordable restricted their participation in many opportunities. They believed that the high cost of childcare arrangements and lack of children-friendly social settings played a key role in their inability to engage in practical and productive activities. One woman with young children and six years of work experience said, *"because of high child care fee, I stopped working"*.

11. IMPACT OF COVID-19 (COHORT 2: AFGHAN WOMEN)

Mental Health

It was reported that for mothers, one of the most challenging parts during COVID-19 was managing homeschooling, which heightened their mental anxieties.

The women's responses in one focus group discussion suggested that they believed COVID-19 affected women's mental health more than men in the local Afghan community. On the contrary, the other focus group discussion participants claimed that they did not experience any significant impact on mental health except for minor stresses due to social isolation.

As stated by one woman participant in this group: *“We are thankful to Australian Government that we didn’t see COVID-19-we only heard the name, we followed the rules-we didn’t have any special mental health issues.”*

Social isolation

Women in this cohort expressed their dissatisfaction with a lack of no-cost/affordable and culturally safe and appropriate social activities for their young children and elders during COVID-19. Most women in this cohort agreed that COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions resulting in social isolation made them sad and stressed.

Family Violence

Any direct reference to this issue or acknowledgement of FV was largely missing in the focus group discussions with Afghan women. However, it was mentioned in one survey response where the female respondent woman believed that COVID-19 further aggravated her FV situation.

“Because my ex-husband was mostly at home during COVID19, his anger problems got worse”.

Financial Struggles

Many women cited the financial difficulties during COVID-19. They reported a loss of employment, loss of income, high prices of groceries and food, inability to pay electricity bills and food insecurity. Some women participants indicated the stigma attached to asking for help (i.e. food or financial assistance). When asked about local community organisations such as Shepparton Food and Financial Services, women did not show awareness about such support services. They had no idea of how to connect to these services. Their suggestion was that information on such services should be disseminated to them by Afghan community leaders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(CONSULTATION COHORT 2: AFGHAN WOMEN ABOVE 25 YEARS OLD)

RECOMMENDATION 1

Provide enhanced language support for Afghan women

The current system of English language training for Afghan women (and men) presents inherent gaps that hinder learners' progress in developing English language proficiency in a realistic timeframe. There is a need to introduce new initiatives and learning models to develop language proficiency and confidence within a reasonable timeframe. This will reduce women's social isolation and dependence and enhance their employment opportunities and social connectedness with the broader community. Under the current system, on average, it takes several years for Afghan women and men to improve their English language proficiency. A review of the current model and provision for additional community-based English Language skill development opportunities can help achieve positive outcomes in a shorter time. This review should include:

- Review of GOTAFE's formal method of language skill training to incorporate (i) classes based on homogenous age group and abilities (ii) non-text book approach of learning with more emphasis on practising English in an informal setting (iii) Presence of bilingual Teacher Aid in English Language Class
- Establishing community-based programs for English language practice sessions for women (face to face or online), such as zoom language practice sessions.
- Establishing programs that connect Afghan women with local volunteer women/groups to practice everyday conversation in the English language.
- Initiating a program where women from the local mainstream community can volunteer to connect and support Afghan women in developing English language skills.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Develop affordable and accessible child care support for Afghan women

Expensive childcare fee is a considerable barrier for Afghan women to participate in social, educational, employment or other activities. Recommendations to address this barrier are listed below:

- Establish a financial grant to support Afghan women to cover their childcare expenses while they engage in learning and employment opportunities.
- Provide subsidised childcare fees for Afghan women to participate in social engagements.

- Create awareness on making community events inclusive for women with young children.
- Provide childcare support arrangements for events and forums organised by the local Council, Ethnic Council and other community organisations.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Develop programs for Parenting support/coaching

Parents' role in the study and work choices needs more enhanced engagement and involvement.

It is recommended that parenting support and coaching should be provided to Afghan parents (both mothers and fathers). Specific actions should include:

- Organise culturally sensitive parenting coaching sessions in Dari and Hazaragi language for both parents. The programs should provide them guidance and support to promote positive family relationships and strategies to deal with conflicts with young people and other day to day parenting issues. Afghan community leaders should encourage and advise parents to avail these parenting counselling opportunities.
- Schools and other career information sessions should include Afghan parents to engage in the discussions. The sessions should be supported by bilingual staff/facilitators to enable parents to ask questions and address their children's career and work choices.
- Financial and logistical support should be provided to the Afghan community for children to learn their first language so that they are able to engage with their parents in a language understood by them. Local Afghan community volunteers who organise Dari language classes should be given funding support to run the program with continuity and adequate facilities, e.g. computers, internet, projectors.
- Ensure that Afghan parents in Shepparton are provided with correct interpretation services, i.e. Dari Interpreters, for Parent Teacher Interviews and when accessing other services.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Provide opportunities to Afghan women without formal qualifications and certifications to use their skills for their own and the community's benefit

A social enterprise setup/or a centre for multicultural women should be set up to support women who cannot participate in social and economic opportunities due to language barriers. Such a setup can start with only one interpreter and minimum resources and create opportunities for Afghan women to engage in commercial activities without formal qualifications. This will help Afghan women keep engaged productively using their cooking, sewing other skills in activities of this social enterprise. The recommended actions include:

- Establish a social enterprise for women to use their skills and be productive, socially connected, financially empowered, and improve their emotional and mental health and well-being.
- Provision of funding and non-financial support (training, networking, etc.) to Community groups to start social enterprise set up for Afghan women on a small scale. For example, a sewing centre, catering service, handicraft centre, etc.
- Ethnic Council Shepparton and District should identify community groups and funding sources from the State Government (Victorian Multicultural Commission) and actively engage with community groups to lead this initiative.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Create regular and ongoing opportunities for social connectedness for Afghan women

Social connectedness for women in the Afghan community should be enhanced to reduce their social isolation that escalated with the arrival of COVID-19 and affected their mental health and general well-being. Recommended actions include:

- Develop opportunities for women, including older women, to participate in social events with or without their families.
- Use existing Community Hubs to organise social gatherings for women with young children and elder parents on a regular and frequent basis. These programs should also provide transport support to them.
- Develop excursions programs for women to introduce them to local tourism, heritage, arts and culture, art museums, local dining.
- Arrange regular women's excursion trips to Melbourne or other regional areas. These opportunities should be inclusive for children so that women with young children can also participate.
- Enable women's connectedness with the broader community through initiatives such as meeting the local women, a buddy program, etc., to enhance their social skills and confidence in interacting with the mainstream community and understanding Australian customs.
- Develop COVID-19 safe online/onsite events for Afghan women to help prevent their social isolation.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Improve access to information for women

It is recommended that the accessibility of information about various services and support should be enhanced and take into account the following considerations:

- Service delivery organisations and the local Council should communicate linguistically appropriate information and messages about their programs and services using unconventional yet the most suitable communication platforms for Afghan women, e.g. WhatsApp community groups.
- Important information and messages on women's health and fitness, education, social events should be translated into Dari language and distributed via video and audio messages, through the local mosques, multicultural shops, WhatsApp and social media groups, Maternal and Child Health Centres, Community Hub, English Language Centre, etc.
- Local Afghan community leaders should receive information on local events, programs, financial support services, employment and program and share it with their community.
- Funding resources should be allocated to Ethnic Council to enhance its capacity to provide language translation and information services to the Afghan community and other service providers, e.g. Greater Shepparton City Council.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Provide fit for purpose/ethno-specific employment support to Afghan women

- Establish a multicultural employment hub in Shepparton for the Afghan community
- Provide strong mentoring support to Afghan women to pursue employment opportunities
- Develop a mentoring program for Afghan women to support them in their personal and professional growth
- Include Bilingual Teacher Aid in School and other Employment Hubs to help and train Afghan women to write job applications, resume and build interview skills

RECOMMENDATION 8

Create awareness in local businesses to discourage racism and biases in hiring practices towards CALD communities, especially women

- Ethnic Council, local Council and the local Chamber of Commerce should partner and undertake the following actions:

- Highlight the need to change the local business community's attitudes towards hiring women from non-English Speaking/Muslim communities
- develop local businesses awareness campaigns (such as 'say no to racism and unconscious biases')
- provide incentives to local businesses to prevent discrimination based on women's dressing /hijab/religious beliefs and cultural traditions
- Launch an award for local businesses that demonstrate inclusion and acceptance by hiring women from non-English speaking/ethnic communities

RECOMMENDATION 9

Develop explicit strategies to include and engage Afghan women in local sports and recreation opportunities

Creating opportunities to engage women in active living based on their specific needs will remove the current barriers that Shepparton's Afghan women face. At an individual level, this will positively impact women's health and well-being, and at a community level, this will enhance the social cohesion and liveability of the region.

To engage Afghan women in sports and recreational activities, it is necessary to be sensitive to their specific needs, circumstances and socio-cultural factors. Communication methods for accessing information about local programs, affordability, transport and childcare support, and availability of women-only facilities are important determinants of enhancing women's participation in sports and active living. The recommended actions include:

- When advertising about current programs, organisations and community groups, e.g. 'Activities in the Park' should use the language and channels that Afghan women use. These channels can include childcare centres, Maternal and Child Health Centres, GP clinics, audio messages on community WhatsApp groups, multicultural shopping precincts, community leaders, mosques.
- Use multicultural/Afghan female role models in advertising and messaging to encourage women and build trust and confidence to participate in sports and recreational activities.
- Create awareness on the importance of culturally appropriate, women-only recreational/fitness services and facilities and remove stigma and discrimination on this issue
- The local Council should provide women-only programs for swimming, sports, aerobics on an ongoing and frequent basis at affordable rates and convenient hours

- Provide childcare and transport support for Afghan women to encourage participation in these sports and recreational opportunities
- Explore the option of establishing a community carpool/transport system for women to travel to these facilities.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Provide ethno specific (as opposed to generalist) and inclusive mental health support for Afghan women

Mental health issues that pre-existed in the community were aggravated after the beginning of COVID-19. To address the current barriers Afghan women, face in addressing mental health issues, tailor-made service instead of a generalist; one size fits all solution must be provided. When designing this cohort's mental health support programs, factors such as stigma, affordability, lack of information, language difficulties, and cultural sensitivities must be considered. Specific recommendations include:

- Develop and implement programs to address current stigma and hesitancy among Afghan women seeking mental health support.
- Deliver awareness of mental health programs and information sessions in culturally and linguistically appropriate settings, such as via school Community Hubs or other trusted local community organisations.
- Include multicultural/Afghan women as workshop facilitators and speakers to build trust and the ability of participants to relate to them.
- Equip local mental health services with bilingual outreach staff trained to become mental health professionals and understand cultural and language factors in engaging women from the Afghan community.
- Advertise these programs through word of mouth, community role models and women's peer groups who can encourage other women to participate in these programs.
- Partner with Local community leaders/mosque Imams to encourage and enable women to attend these programs.
- Provide financial support to Afghan women in seeking mental health support. This can be administered locally by a pool of funds to cover women's mental health expenses.

- Provide opportunities for social events, recreational and sports activities to Afghan women to help with their day to day anxiety, mental stresses and other mental health challenges.

RECOMMENDATION 11

Provide affordable and accessible recreational activities for children and young people

For children and young people to reduce their dependence on technology and gadgets and improve their social and interpersonal skills, the following actions should be undertaken:

- Establish an Afghan community Centre/Hub for children and young people to engage in affordable, low-no cost and accessible healthy activities outside school hours and during public holidays.
- Provide low cost/subsidised recreational activities for Shepparton's Afghan community to enable children and young people to play indoor games and activities that are gadget/device free.

RECOMMENDATION 12

Establish culturally sensitive and linguistically appropriate Family Violence awareness and prevention programs targeted at women

Discussions in the women's cohort identified the following recommended actions in addressing the issue of family and Family Violence in the Afghan community:

- Ethnic Council should continue to deliver regular information sessions on respectful relationships, cultural-religious dimensions of positive family relationships, and Australian Family Laws. These programs must be delivered by bilingual workers who speak the Dari language. The programs should be targeted towards Afghan men, women, young people, and the Afghan community leaders and Imams.
- A bilingual worker at the local Magistrate Court should be available every day to provide support, advice and information to Afghan women on Family Violence matters.
- Agencies involved in dealing with Family Violence matters, such as police, legal aid centres, etc., should be provided with cultural competence training to interact with multicultural communities on Family Violence issues effectively.

RECOMMENDATION 13

Provide alternative interim solutions to Public Transport problem

Lack of efficient public transport systems is a major barrier to Afghan women's participation in all spheres of life. In the absence of a long-term solution, short-term and needs-based community solutions

and programs should fill the gap and provide temporary relief to disadvantaged people due to lack of transport. The consultation with women identified the following recommended actions:

- Introduce community-based transport services (run by not for profit/social enterprise) for women for travelling to the gym, sports activities, social events, hospital visits and after school activities. As discussed previously, explore services such as the ⁶LINK Community Transport that offers affordable transport services to communities.

Note: The above recommendation does not negate the need for a long-term and sustainable public transport solution for the local community.

RECOMMENDATION 14

Establish Afghan Older Women's Group to run programs for positive ageing for Afghan women

The program should focus on the physical, mental and emotional well-being of older Afghan women. The program should also link them to healthcare, transport, community support, NDIS, etc.

The program should be developed to engage older Afghan women in social and cultural events, exercise programs, non-class based English learning, arts and craftwork, etc. This will contribute towards Afghan women's positive and healthy ageing.

⁶ [LINK Community Transport](http://linkcommunitytransport.org.au) <http://linkcommunitytransport.org.au>

CONSULTATION COHORT 3: AFGHAN MEN (AGE GROUP: ABOVE 25 YEARS OLD)

KEY FINDINGS

1. Afghan men on bridging visas, Temporary Protection Visa (TPV)/Safe Haven Visa (SHEV) experience enormous health and well-being issues. The main issues impacting this cohort are outlined below:
 - i. Asylum seekers on bridging visas do not have a right to a family reunion and cannot re-enter Australia if they travel overseas. Life is in limbo for those on SHEV visas due to the Government's policy that does not provide a permanent residence option at the expiry of SHEV visas; they cannot return to Afghanistan, nor can they arrange for their families to visit them.
 - ii. There is a prevalence of loneliness, isolation and mental health issues among these men due to separation from families.
 - iii. There is a deep feeling of betrayal of trust in them towards the Australian Government due to its failure to grant their families visas. These Afghan men suffer from a strong sense of helplessness, frustration and guilt towards their overseas families. They cannot join them in Australia due to a lengthy visa processing time spanning many years.
 - iv. Uncertainty of their visa status and low prospects of their family union distract them from learning the English language in a formal learning setting. The result is a continued language barrier contributing to other problems in their daily lives.
 - v. Fear of deportation and language barrier contributes to their reluctance to access legal and police help in crime, burglary, violence.
2. Afghan men experience isolation, depression, anxieties and mental stresses due to various reasons such as parenting, divorce, financial struggles, language barriers, living alone away from families. COVID-19 has escalated mental health issues among men.
3. Dissatisfaction with local high schools' environment and school administration's inability to exercise early intervention in addressing the issue of smoking and drugs among their teenage children.
4. Social stigma around smoking, drugs and alcohol issues deters Afghan parents from seeking support services at the right time.
5. The current school setting does not allow Afghan parents and teachers to work together for children's behavioural training.

6. Afghan parents living in Shepparton have worries and concerns about inadequate tertiary education options for their teenage children who are compelled to leave home to study in Melbourne or elsewhere.
7. Challenges for Afghan parents include the inability of Afghan youth to find jobs after graduation resulting in them leaving Shepparton/family home.
8. There is a lack of mistrust with the Police department due to untoward personal safety incidents encountered by some participants. This mistrust is partly due to past experiences in their home country, where the image of police was largely based on fear and suspicion.
9. Lack of awareness among the Afghan community on local laws and local council services- mainly due to language barriers.
10. Lack of a Community Centre/Social Hub for Afghan Community for socialisation and learning opportunities.
11. Concerns on lack of female specialists at GV Health to offer safe and culturally appropriate healthcare services to Afghan women.
12. Escalating Family Violence (FV) due to conflicts between evolving social attitudes to gender equality and socio-cultural beliefs and traditions supporting patriarchy in the Afghan community. (Men try to reassert their authority by using violence in situations where their authority is perceived to be undermined.)
13. Afghan men have concerns about insufficient entertainment and sports opportunities for young people, especially young women, due to a lack of culturally safe and appropriate space for recreational and fitness activities (e.g. women-only swimming opportunities).
14. Inability to travel overseas to visit families due to COVID-19 restrictions exasperated pre-existing stresses of living away from family for Afghan men living alone in Shepparton.
15. Afghan male community leaders demonstrate concerns about slow COVID-19 vaccination due to misinformation and vaccine hesitancy in the community.

DISCUSSION

Community consultation with this cohort involved two Focus Group Discussions (the first one was held in a local Mosque and the other at the Scouts Hall community centre) and a handful of online survey responses. These FGDs were run with the support of a bilingual staff member of Ethnic Council Shepparton. A total of 19 male participants were included in consultation with this cohort. All of them were born in Afghanistan. Their year of arrival in Greater Shepparton was between 2003 to 2017. Six participants were permanent residents, eight were Australian citizens, four on Temporary Protection Visa (TPV), and one did not disclose his visa status. Afghan men with ⁷TPV/Safe Haven (SHEV) visa holders who participated in this consultation have lived in Australia/ Shepparton since 2012. Two of these participants were unemployed, and two had casual/part-time work. Out of the 19 male participants in this cohort, seven participants lived alone, and 11 lived with their family/parents and one did not provide this information. In terms of their work status, out of 19, eight had full-time work, four were casual workers, one was a part-time worker, and six were unemployed. (See profile details in Annex).

The consultation provided an enhanced understanding of key issues currently experienced by the local Afghan community from the perspective of Afghan men. It was conferred that the arrival of COVID-19 had intensified current issues in financial, social and mental health domains. The sorrowful plight of Afghan men living alone in Shepparton and unable to reunite with their families in Australia due to the complexities of the Australian Immigration system dominated the discussions in the first FGD session. The discussions raised serious concerns for the well-being of Afghan men on Temporary Protection Visa (TPV). The focus group discussion participants noted that these men were living with intense emotional and mental health challenges and had a bleak future.

This section highlights the main areas of concern identified during the consultation with the cohort of Afghan men aged 25 to 60 years old. While briefly touching on some known and general settlement issues, these discussions provided more significant insights into the unique aspects and impacts of issues experienced by Afghan men in their day-to-day lives before and after the beginning of COVID-19.

1. PARENTING CHALLENGES FOR MEN

The participants in this cohort also included male leaders of Shepparton's Afghan Hazara community. They are known as the 'Chanda Group' members. These participants raised the following main concerns as a parent:

⁷ A Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) is one of two types of [temporary protection visas](#) available to those claiming asylum who come by boat. This is part of the Australian Government's current policy that people who come by boat and claim asylum should not be given permanent protection. ([Temporary protection visas and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas - Information \(refugeecouncil.org.au\)](#))

Lack of understanding in School's role in managing teenage behaviour and social issues (e.g. smoking and drugs)

Participants in this cohort described their current concerns about School's role in tackling teenage behavioural and social issues. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the atmosphere and management of local public secondary schools. In describing these issues, they emphasised that *"their good kids, both girls and boys, were exposed to many wrongs and anti-social behaviours and activities in their schools"*.

Some participants lamented that their teenage children started experimenting with smoking, marijuana and other drugs within the boundaries of their schools. In their opinion, the school administration's management of these issues was less than satisfactory. They vehemently questioned the efficiency and expertise of schools in managing this problem.

During this focus group discussion session, some participants complained that often as parents, they found out about such problems too late in the process, when the situation was already out of control. Due to their parents' late discovery of these problems, the affected teenage children were missing out on the opportunity of early interventions and counselling support.

One participant shared his insights saying that:

"I know children who started substance abuse in year seven and parents got to know only after they started university".

The participants admitted that the stigma of acknowledging and reporting these problems by the affected parents was a major barrier to early intervention and support to their children in quitting smoking or drug use.

"Some parents, even if they know that their children are taking e-cigarettes, do not want to tell others", reflected one participant.

Another challenge alluded to by the participants was the unhelpful role of mothers who, according to men, often protected and defended their children once their fathers found out about these issues. This, according to them, posed hurdles in early intervention to address smoking and drugs addiction in young people.

Overall there was an acknowledgement by the participants that (i) both parents and schools had a role to play in protecting their children from smoking and drug use in schools (ii) schools, in addition to academic studies, should also impart education to their students about the dangerous effects of smoking, and drug use (iii) there was a need in the community for parenting support and coaching to deal with the smoking and drugs issue in young people in the community.

While expressing their understanding that schools were responsible for two aspects of education, namely academic and behavioural training, they questioned if, in reality, the local schools were successful in delivering both of these outcomes.

The study participants believed that those students with severe smoking and drug issues should be separated from other students and be supported in special settings, e.g. The ACE College. One participant emphasised that *“these children should not study together in mainstream schools”*.

There was also a realisation in this cohort that *“parents alone or teachers/schools alone cannot do this”*. Teachers should engage with parents to address issues in both aspects of children’s education. Participants of consultation in this cohort expressed their dissatisfaction with the current gap between Afghan parents and local schools in managing early signs of smoking and drug use in their teenage children.

Limited tertiary education opportunities

During the consultation, Afghan men expressed their dissatisfaction with the tertiary education opportunities for their children in Shepparton. They stated that many young people had to leave Shepparton after finishing VCE due to a lack of locally available tertiary study pathways.

Another aspect of this problem was that it was a challenge for young people and was also a source of major distress for their parents, who prefer their teenage children to live with them under their supervision. They apprehended that young people would move away from home from their traditional values and customs and become exposed to anti-social behaviours/lifestyles once away from home.

“We don’t want to leave Shepparton but have to leave (because of our children)”, one male parent lamented.

Employment difficulties for young people

Similar to the employment challenges reported by the cohort of young people during this study, Afghan men also highlighted the difficulties young people face in finding jobs after graduating from university. The participants expressed concerns that a lack of access to locally available white-collar jobs often meant their children had to accept blue-collar work roles such as construction workers.

The participants also believed that a key barrier to young people’s employment was the absence of a support/employment network that they could rely on to access the local job market. This problem was also explained in earlier sections of the report when discussing consultation findings with Afghan Youth Cohort.

Mental Health

Some participants in this cohort revealed that due to the challenges of parenting young people with mental health-related problems, many parents were themselves experiencing severe mental stresses.

2. LANGUAGE BARRIER

During the focus group discussions, Afghan men in this cohort acknowledged that the language barrier and lack of English proficiency was key issue for them. The result was their inability to communicate their problems with others.

“We can’t communicate what we feel or think”, said one participant.

It was revealed that Afghan men were unable to understand local council laws, regulations, information, and service details due to the language barrier. This often leads them to distressing situations. An example was quoted by a participant when some community members had to pay hefty fines to dispose of household recycling items at the wrong location. Many in their community did not understand the information and signage in English to prohibit the public from disposing of recycling items at those locations. They ended up leaving their recycled goods for donation at that location. This action, although unintentional, resulted in receiving infringement notices from the local Council.

It was explained that around 20 local Afghan families had wrongly disposed of their donations in front of the SALVO shop, not realising that the local Council had strictly prohibited any dumping of recycling/donation items in front of the shop. The signage in English didn't help them go to the correct location for depositing their donations. This example demonstrated that the language issue was a key barrier for them in comprehending day to day information and communication delivered by the local Council and other service providers in the English language.

3. LACK OF AWARENESS ABOUT LOCAL SERVICES AND COUNCIL’S ROLE

The participants in this cohort admitted during the discussions that they did not understand the role of the local Council. Concerns were raised that the local Council’s promotional and informational community messages were not reaching or accessible to the local Afghan community. This discussion reflected a gap in the local Council's communication and engagement method that was neither multilingual nor distributed via key ethnic media channels/platforms. Participants admitted that the Ethnic Council of Shepparton was their primary source of information about local services and support.

4. FAMILY VIOLENCE (FV)

This cohort of Afghan men was open to discussions on the issue of family violence in the community. In one of the focus group discussions, the male community leaders identified Family Violence (FV) as a pre-existing issue that had escalated with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Describing the difficulties in early intervention and violence prevention, the consultation participants stated that most of the time, these issues reached the knowledge of the community leaders at advanced stages when the matter had gone to the police. *“We only find out when the case has already gone to the police- after the police call us asking for mediation, we try to mediate and resolve the issue”.*

A consensus among Afghan men in this cohort was that the preferred approach to address family violence was through early intervention-much before the case was filed with the police.

The participants suggested that *“we have to have a committee- the police should call the elders and Imam (the spiritual leader at the Mosque) to discuss and solve the problem mutually”.*

The male community leaders agreed that there was a strong need for community leaders and police to work collaboratively to address FV matters.

The discussions highlighted that under the current scenario, community leaders were reluctant and afraid to intervene in FV issues directly with the families. *“Every elder fears that they might be in trouble if they intervene with Police”*, said one community leader. They emphasised that *“we need a committee to have the authority to work with Police”.*

During the FGD, participants also shed light on factors responsible for FV in the local Afghan community. Key factors, according to them, included (i) the patriarchal nature of traditional Afghan families where men hold power in their families and women are largely excluded from it (ii) the husband-wife conflicts arising with the growing exposure of women about their rights and freedom in Australia.

One participant explained that *“men and their wives are happy when they come to Australia. Then women go to learn English, where they learn the language and learn that men cannot order them to cook, clean, etc. At this point, men start feeling that they are no longer the boss of the house-this triggers conflicts and tensions in the relationship that leads to family violence”.*

The study participants in this cohort emphasised the need to prevent FV in their community. They believed this was possible through better education and counselling of men and women while considering their social and cultural sensitivities/factors.

(The participants of this discussion did not bring up other reasons contributing to family violence, such as forced marriages of girls and the role of other family members in these situations. The discussion mainly revolved around the changing dynamics of gender roles in marital relationships, also seen as undermining men's authority and reasserting this authority with violence.)

5. LACK OF CULTURALLY SAFE AND APPROPRIATE RECREATIONAL, FITNESS AND SPORTS OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

During the consultation, participants validated and supported the need for culturally safe and appropriate services and activities for Afghan women in Shepparton. They identified that the main areas needing women-only services in Shepparton included health services, aquatic & recreation programs, and sports. The participants believed that women in their community were disadvantaged as they could not participate and avail these services in a way that aligned with their cultural traditions. The participants expressed their strong desire for more frequent and regular women-only swimming sessions at the local aquatic centre run by the local Council.

6. LACK OF AFGHAN COMMUNITY CENTRE FOR RECREATION AND SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

The participants of the FGDs brought up the issue of unavailability of a community hall/centre for the local Afghan community and their inability to hire other halls for events because *“other halls are expensive”*.

The male community leaders proposed that an extension to the local Afghan mosque would allow children to play while their parents attended events. They expressed their aspiration that *“like the African House (in Shepparton), we need a community centre either on the Mosque land or outside.”*

The consultation participants also highlighted their concerns that there was no entertainment for young people in their community. They expressed a strong interest in playing recreational, non-competitive volleyball, which was impossible due to their lack of access to a volleyball stadium.

“We don't have volleyball stadiums”, said one participant. The participants in this consultation expressed their interest in playing sports other than soccer and football, popular among Australians.

7. ISSUES OF AFGHAN MEN SEPARATED FROM FAMILIES

Some participants in this cohort were men who had arrived by boat in Australia as refugees/asylum seekers without a valid visa and were granted Temporary Protection Visa (TPV/SHEV visas). Community consultation with this cohort of men highlighted the strict conditions with the Temporary Protection Visa (TPV).

Some salient features of the Temporary Protection Visa and SHEV are as follows⁸:

- *Neither visa allows you to become a citizen.*

⁸ Reference: RACS, *Refugee Advice and Casework Service, Fact Sheet: Temporary Protection Visas (TPV) and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEV)*

- *Neither visa allows you to sponsor family members.*
- *Neither visa allows you to travel outside of Australia and then return unless the Minister for Immigration grants permission for you to do so.*
- *TPV does not allow you to apply for any other visa*
- *For a SHEV visa, if you meet the regional work/study pathway requirements, you can apply for a work, student or family visa.*

Due to these harsh visa conditions, Afghan men in the community on TPV/SHEV visas are neither able to visit their families in their home country nor bring their families here.

The participants of focus group discussions who were on TPV told that they had been living in Australia since 2012 and were unsuccessful in bringing their families to Australia over this period. Their grievance was that when they first arrived in Australia, they were given the understanding (by the Australian Government) that they could obtain Permanent Residency Visa after a while, following which they would be able to bring their families to Australia. However, the Australian Government's policy changed, meaning it was impossible to do so later on. Due to these revised policies, even though they had met the conditions of SHEV, e.g. working in the regional area, they were not eligible to apply for a permanent residency visa for themselves or their families.

The participants voiced their disappointment, saying that "*the Government has gone back on its promise*".

The recurring theme of these discussions was the ordeals of TPV visa holders, which created an immense feeling of uncertainty and loss of control over their lives as they were separated from their families. This challenge also resonated with other men in this cohort who, despite having a permanent residence status, could not bring their families to Australia due to visa processing waiting time that had spanned over several years. Those participants who did not personally experience the issue were also touched and sympathetic towards these men's sufferings separated from their families. Their joint plea was to convey their message to the Australian Government to resolve this visa problem and grant them and their families permanent residence visas to start living a normal life. It was noted that in the absence of a solution to this problem, this group's mental, emotional and physical well-being was at high risk as they were dealing with many challenges and issues.

Key issues impacting this group of men separated from their families are outlined as below:

Inability to participate in children's upbringing and support their families

Afghan men living alone in Shepparton without their families constantly worry about their separated families and children. They fear what would happen to their families overseas and who would take care of their children. They fear if they die, who will take care of their family.

Some of the participants had been in this situation away from their families and children for several years. It was emphasised that they were constantly worried about their family and children growing up without supervision. One participant said:

"I don't know how my children are being brought up- whether they have got into drugs, gambling?"

"I request govt. to save my life, my family's life and let me bring my children here. They can serve this country".

Mental Health and loneliness

Participants of focus group discussions outlined the rampant mental health issues among Afghan men who were living alone in Shepparton and/or are on bridging or TPV/SHEV visas. Concerns were raised that their inability to unite with their families, loneliness and seeing no hopes of any solution to this problem had resulted in depression, sadness and loss of self-esteem among these men.

Life in limbo with suffering

The discussions highlighted that some of these men were no longer on Centre Link support and had successfully secured jobs in farms; generally speaking, they were satisfied with their work and contributed to the economy and the Australian community. However, their inability to bring their families to Australia or buy a house had created a constant uncertainty in life. To them, their life was in limbo, and they were not sure what the future held for them in Australia. They questioned their purpose in life while separated from their families.

"I have been in this situation for ten years. My life has been ruined", lamented one participant.

Another participant explained his situation where his SHEV visa had expired. He was advised by the immigration that he could go back but could not return to Australia. This inability to return to Australia stopped him from leaving the country and seeing his family. Consequently, his decision to remain in Australia had created a perpetual state of indecisiveness and limbo for him.

Another uncertainty for SHEV visa holders was their inability to buy a house as they were ineligible for a bank loan.

The language barrier and learning issues

These participants lamented that due to the ongoing emotional and mental stress of their TPV visa issue, they could not focus on learning English in their classes in the GOTAFE program. They admitted that as the pressure of this issue was always at the forefront of their minds, they couldn't have any motivation to focus on learning activities. The result was that their English proficiency had remained limited in the past several years, which in turn had created barriers for them in other aspects of their day to day lives, e.g. they were unable to share their feelings and thoughts with others.

Mistrust & Fear

The discussions also highlighted that due to the uncertainty of their visa status, lack of language proficiency and unawareness of their legal rights, there was a fair degree of mistrust and fear when dealing with the local police department.

One man shared a fear of deportation that prevented them from reporting any criminal/violent incidents experienced by them. They also felt that the police were not effective in controlling the perpetrators of such incidents experienced by them. Lack of trust in police departments to protect them from burglary and violent incidents was also reported by one participant who had been directly affected by an incident of violence and physical assault in Shepparton.

8. IMPACTS OF COVID-19 (COHORT 3: AFGHAN MEN)

Family Violence

The male community leaders in this cohort confirmed that due to COVID-19, family violence and mental health issues had escalated in their community.

Mental Health

Male participants reaffirmed that the isolation faced by the community during lockdowns contributed to people's mental health challenges.

Financial Difficulties

It was stated during the consultation that COVID-19 resulted in financial struggles for many in the community due to loss of employment or cancellation of work placements.

Dissatisfaction with the COVID-19 vaccination program

This cohort also expressed their dissatisfaction with the COVID-19 vaccination program highlighting that there was a lot of misinformation circulating in their community. Confusion on which vaccine to choose (Pfizer, Astra Zeneca) and the slow pace of vaccination were also raised as concerns.

Their view was that vaccines should be made 'compulsory'.

COVID-19 issues impacting Afghan Men separated from families

Overseas Travelling Restrictions:

When asked about the impacts of COVID-19, participants expressed sadness and disappointment that COVID-19 had further restricted their opportunities to see their families due to international border closures. This ongoing separation from their families and further travel restrictions due to COVID-19 had added to their distress and impacted their emotional, mental and physical health and well-being.

One man contributed to the discussion, saying that before COVID-19, he was at least able to travel overseas to see his family, but since COVID-19, it had become difficult to travel.

“My wife is seriously ill (overseas), alone with young children- why doesn’t this Government listen?” he questioned.

Lack of motivation to learn English during COVID-19

Afghan men living away from their families spoke about their added difficulties and inability to focus on learning English.

One such participant said that he could not concentrate on his English language classes that went online during COVID-19.

His inability to concentrate on his lessons due to his situation resulted in the loss of focus, with the result that he could not pass his exams. He admitted that even though his teachers were helpful and supportive during the period, he could not concentrate on his studies due to the ongoing issue of separation from his family. *“When I am studying English, I question, why am I studying? My family is away”*, he said.

Escalating Mental Health and Emotional Challenges

One participant disclosed that before COVID-19, he had stress, but he was at least able to travel overseas to see his family. COVID, however, had put extra pressure on him. *“I do not know how much pressure can I cope with”*.

The participants in this scenario exclaimed that their helplessness and the feeling of being powerless to rectify their situation, and the added complexity brought by COVID-19 had worsened their mental health issues.

There was a uniform belief among them that if only their families were united, they would not have to go through their current mental and emotional health challenges in life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(CONSULTATION COHORT 3: AFGHAN MEN ABOVE 25 YEARS OLD)

RECOMMENDATION 1

Provide parenting support to Afghan parents that is tailored to address the issue of smoking and drugs in young people.

These recommendations are on the premise that Afghan parents need additional specific support instead of generalist solutions due to the language and cultural barriers. It is recommended that:

- A closer partnership/communication/collaboration and shared commitment between schools, parents, and students should be established to prevent young people from smoking and drug use.
- Develop culturally and linguistically appropriate coaching programs for Afghan parents to equip them with strategies to detect these problems and intervene early. A program should be in place to guide Afghan parents to talk to their children about the dangers of smoking and drugs. This should also include education on dealing with the stigma and shame once parents learn about these behaviours.
- Schools should develop and implement regular education programs for students on the harmful effects of smoking and drugs. This should guide and educate young people on making smart choices for themselves for their health and life in general.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Develop enhanced tertiary education opportunities in Shepparton

The local Council and community leaders should strongly lobby federal and state governments to strengthen tertiary education opportunities and study pathways in Shepparton. More study choices, subjects, and technical and vocational skills development opportunities should be made available locally to retain young people and their families in Shepparton.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Develop tailor-made programs to address employment difficulties faced by young people in the Afghan community

(This recommendation is discussed in detail in previous sections. Ref. *Cohort: Afghan Women, 25-60 years old.*)

RECOMMENDATION 4

Prevalence of mental health issues in Shepparton's Afghan community should be acknowledged and programs and services should be developed targeting their specific needs

Mental health support services should be extended in a culturally safe space to the Afghan community. This support should be tailor-made to the requirements of Afghan parents, taking into account their specific circumstances, social, cultural and religious beliefs and language translation requirements.

(For details, refer to the recommendation in the previous sections on this topic. Ref. *Cohort: Afghan Youth and Afghan Women, 25-60 years old.*)

RECOMMENDATION 5

English language support

There is a clear need for enhanced language support for the Afghan community in general and more specifically for adult men and women. Following actions are recommended:

- Review the current model of English language learning programs for new arrivals (refugee/asylum seekers). The current English language learning model is class-based and has demonstrated gaps in its effectiveness. It is recommended that a review of the learning model be undertaken to include real-life/informal settings for practising conversational English. Refer to the recommendation in the previous sections on this topic for details. Ref. *Cohort: Afghan Women, 25-60 years old*)
- The local Council should work with the Ethnic Council to translate and disseminate important messages, e.g. COVID-19 health messages, business support, etc., in Hazaragi/Dari.
- The local Council should review its communications policy to ensure multilingual communication and in key ethnic media channels. Council communications about services, events, and programs should be disseminated in Dari/Hazaragi and other community languages.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Develop awareness programs on the local Council's role in the community

In partnership with the Ethnic Council, the local Council should frequently run regular programs to inform the Afghan community about the local Council's role, services, and local laws. These programs should run on different topics, e.g. waste education, events, rates, the introduction of Councillors/Mayors, etc.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Implement a holistic approach to address the Family Violence issue

The pervasiveness and sensitivity around the issue of Family Violence in the Afghan community require a considerate and holistic approach. This should address different layers of the problem in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner. Recommended actions include:

Removing the Stigma

- As a first step, obtain buy-in from Afghan community leaders (men and women) to acknowledge the existence of the problem and commit to addressing this issue
- Organise regular and periodic culturally and linguistically appropriate awareness programs/workshops for the community on FV prevention strategies.

Education

- Develop awareness/education programs on Australian Family Laws and Australian customs among the Afghan community
- Afghan men and women should be enabled and encouraged to participate in these programs regularly.

Service delivery

Organisations responsible for FV services, e.g. Orange Door, Primary Care Connect, should provide a specialised FV support stream to Afghan families. These services should be made more accessible, taking into account the six components of accessibility as discussed previously:

(Ref: Working_with_Multicultural_Youth_-_Programs,_strategies_and_future_directions)

When considering access to services, planning needs to address six components of accessibility:

- *visible accessibility (awareness of service);*
- *physical accessibility (transport, location);*
- *procedural accessibility (referral and registration processes);*
- *economic accessibility (affordability);*
- *psychological accessibility (beliefs and expectations of service users); and*
- *cultural accessibility (language, values and behavioural norms).*

Partnership and collaboration

Local Afghan community leaders/Imam and the Police department should work together, and a committee should be established to work on FV issues in preventive and corrective phases.

Afghan male leadership should be encouraged and enabled to include women's participation in the committee.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Develop infrastructure and programs for social connectedness, sports and recreation opportunities

Following the community aspirations, it is recommended that the Afghan community should be provided financial and logistical support to develop a community centre in Shepparton. This community centre will provide a space for the community to socialise and arrange events and gatherings for educational, social, and recreational purposes. Afghan community should be supported in their application to the Multicultural Infrastructure Fund for this project.

Afghan men should be supported in community sports, e.g. volleyball, regularly. There should be ongoing/regular sports opportunities accessible to men.

Women-only spaces should be created to enable Afghan women to participate in sports and recreational activities (see details in the previous section – Afghan Women cohort).

RECOMMENDATION 9

All levels of Government should take empathetic and serious actions to help address the issues of family reunion for Afghan men

The humanitarian issue of family reunion for Afghan men should be prioritised by the Australian Government so that this cohort could attend to their other problems, e.g. language barriers, mental and physical health issues, social connectedness, etc. Unless their core issue of visa/family reunion is addressed, all other problems will continue to linger on for them. Any solution to address these problems will be superficial and have a mere band-aid effect. The recommended actions include:

- Australian Government should review its TPV policy and provide a pathway to the temporary protection visa holders (refugees and asylum seekers) for permanent settlement in Australia.
- Australian Government should make concerted efforts to unite the families of refugees, asylum seekers, and those on PR who originally arrived in Australia on humanitarian grounds. There is a compelling argument to fast track visas for their families on humanitarian grounds and to help address the current alarming state of the health and well-being of these community members.
- The local Council and other local community organisations in partnership with Ethnic Council should lobby strongly for refugees, asylum seekers (on Temporary Visa Protection, SHEVE, bridging visa).

CONSULTATION COHORT 4: AFGHAN MALE ELDERS (AGE GROUP: ABOVE 60 YEARS AND SEPARATED FROM FAMILIES OVERSEAS)

KEY FINDINGS

A summary of key findings is presented below:

1. Afghan elderly male asylum seekers and refugees who are living in Shepparton on Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) and Bridging visa experience severe mental, emotional and physical health issues.
2. Limited entitlements of TPV/Bridging Visa holders to healthcare service, work rights, housing assistance and legal assistance, etc., significantly impact the quality of life of these male elders in the community.
3. Afghan male elders with Permanent Residency visas are grieved by the long delays (spanning over several years) in the approval of visa applications for their overseas family members.
4. Due to the loneliness and separation from families, male elders in this cohort suffer from a strong sense of lack of purpose and hope for the future.
5. Male elders in this cohort are indisputably unable to engage in and concentrate on English learning programs due to their mental and emotional health battles.
6. Due to desperation to seek immigration/visa advice, elders often trust dodgy and non-credible lawyers, causing them financial loss and added anguish.
7. COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions further aggravated isolation and lack of social connectedness for male elders in this cohort. This, in turn, impacted their health and well-being.

DISCUSSION

Community consultation with the cohort of Afghan male elders living alone in Shepparton was through the Focus Group Discussion session held at the Scouts Hall. The session was facilitated with the help of bilingual staff at Ethnic Council Shepparton, who works closely with this group. The fact that the participants in this group were old (above 60 years old) and ageing distinguished their living situation from men, who were also separated from their families due to Australian Immigration policies, consulted in Cohort 3 (Afghan Men: above 25 years old). The consultation with this cohort of Afghan male elders shed light on their unique circumstances. All participants in this cohort had initially arrived from

Afghanistan as asylum seekers/refugees and had been unable to bring their families to Australia due to harsh visa conditions.

A total of 17 male elders participated in this FGD of which 15 were living alone, separated from their families overseas. Four elders had Permanent Residence status, ten were on Temporary Protection Visa (including two on bridging visa), and one participant did not specify his visa status. Only one of these elders was a casual worker, whereas the other 14 elders were not employed. In this cohort, the earliest arrival in Australia was in 2010, and the most recent arrival was in 2014. A demographic profile of this cohort is available in section Annex.

A discussion with this cohort on key issues impacting Afghan male elders before and after the COVID-19 pandemic identified their core issues and how they impacted their daily lives, well-being, social and financial circumstances. The following section presents the main issues affecting this cohort.

1. SEPARATION FROM FAMILIES – ROOT CAUSE OF CHALLENGES

Discussion participants highlighted their daily issues and struggles, both before and after the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to them, the root cause of these issues was the uncertainty due to their inability to reunite with their families. They raised the issue of ageing in isolation and distress without the support of their family. Some have lived in Australia for more than nine years. They lamented that their extended separation from their families, the frustration and grief of not being together, and the uncertainty of their future in Australia and their families' future overseas contributed to their deteriorating health and well-being. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic perpetuated their anxieties and loneliness. It deprived them of the opportunity to see their friends in the community due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions.

Most participants in this cohort were on TPV/SHEV visas that lacked any pathway for their permanent residence in Australia and the opportunity for their families to travel to Australia and live together. Despite holding a permanent residence status, a few participants in this cohort were also unable to bring their families to Australia due to a long wait for their family's visa application processing.

The participants in this cohort expressed their appreciation for the support they received from the Ethnic Council Shepparton and its advocacy on their behalf for resolving the immigration-related matters for them and their families. However, a continued disappointment from the Australian Government in listening to and acting on their pleas had left them sad and depressed. They expressed frustrations that their lives had been in limbo due to visa restrictions and the resulting uncertainty of reuniting with their families. According to the male elders in this cohort, this unresolved issue resulted in many other challenges and problems in their daily lives.

A summary of issues narrated by the participants is presented below:

Impact on health and well-being

All participants of this group described their experiences of living with various health issues. Separation from families and uncertainty of future away from their children and partners has affected their overall physical, mental and emotional well-being. During the discussions, participants revealed that they suffered from massive sleep disorders, depression, low mood, anxiety and low self-esteem. The participants believed that the cure for their health and well-being issues did not lie in medicines and other therapeutic methods, e.g. gardening, as was often advised.

One male elder living alone for the past eight years said:

“Doctors advised me to do gardening instead of staying inside my room-gardening cannot solve my problem- I have children, grandchildren in Pakistan. How can I forget them?”

Another participant disclosed: *“Most nights I toss and turn and go out walking in the street-this is psychotic”. I have been suffering from mental health issues- I have visited doctors, used their prescribed medicines, but they never worked because the cause of our mental health is our personal life (referring to his visa status and harsh conditions associated with that); I have nightmares, and I start shouting”.*

Another participant disclosed that even though he had a Permanent Residence, he had been waiting to reunite with his family for the last ten years. He travelled overseas three years ago to visit his family but later could not do it anymore due to safety issues.

“I take 21 tablets in 24 hours for mental health and other illnesses”, said one participant.

Most of the elders in this cohort, in their own words, *have become psychotic*, with other health issues such as high blood pressure, cholesterol and diabetes.

“My family is destroyed- for the sake of humanity; Government should stop torturing us. What's the use of this torture?” One participant questioned.

Loss of pride and a sense of purpose in life

Participants in this cohort said they had succumbed to the belief that their purpose in life did not exist anymore. They lamented the despair caused by being away from their families with no hopes of the union in the foreseeable future. A feeling of helplessness was a common sentiment among the participants.

One participant pleaded to the Government during the focus group discussion, saying, *“Don't they have children? Why don't they feel our pain?”*

Another participant explained that:

"We thought life would be better in Australia, but since arriving here, we have been suffering and tortured (as our families are still overseas). We were not like this; we were younger and healthier- but the Government treated us like garbage. We are useless now for ourselves and the Government."

Another participant exclaimed, *"We failed 100%-we have no place to live in Afghanistan due to the threat of Taliban, ISIS as they are hunting for us. We can't go back there, and we can't live here with our families. We are only eating and sleeping- We have lost everything in this journey, including our human dignity and respect"*.

Emotional trauma and guilt

The emotional trauma of not being able to support their children and families and be together with them emerged as a massive burden on the conscience of male elders during the consultation. They stated that the stressful living conditions and lack of safety for their children and partners overseas were a constant source of guilt and ordeal for them.

A participant (who arrived in Australia in 2012) shared that his son was kidnapped back home in 2001; he had been missing since then. This ordeal had taken a toll on his wife's mental health and his own emotional and mental state. He felt guilty for failing to support his family in this tragedy. He added, *"My wife cries all day. I am not healthy either. I miss my family all the time, and I feel as I have a fire burning in my heart all the time"*.

Another participant described his sentiments: *"My life is destroyed. I am useless for Australia, but if my children could have come here, they would have been able to serve this country and be useful. My life destroyed here, and my children's life destroyed overseas"*.

For the participants in this cohort, the burden of destroying their own lives and the lives of the whole family was unbearable. One elder participated by saying, *"It is not a question of one person-the whole family is suffering. I am destroyed here; my family is destroyed there."*

2. LIVING WITH INADEQUATE HEALTH, FINANCIAL, HOUSING AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES

Some participants in this cohort, when describing their day to day struggles, said that because they were sharing accommodation with other people, they were mindful of the disturbances their health issues were causing their co-residents.

One participant lamented that he had been suffering for the past nine years. He said he was sharing a room with young people and was distressed to interrupt their sleep.

“I wake up many times during the night. When I cough, I have to go out so that the other person is not disturbed”, he said.

The ageing elderly participants in this cohort who received Centrelink support highlighted that the Centrelink financial support was insufficient as they did not have access to other services such as healthcare.

Another participant stated that he had been traumatised by a personal assault on him- since then, he was living in fear and insecurity. The incident left him shaken and unable to leave the house and see friends.

The participants noted that such incidents had perpetuated the anxiety and distress of these fragile older men in the community.

3. INABILITY TO CONCENTRATE ON ENGLISH LEARNING AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

The discussions with elders in this group also identified that living with intense personal challenges of loneliness and distress about their family situation has rendered them unable to take advantage of any learning activities such as the English Learning programs.

The concern was raised that even though they had been enrolled in these programs for several years, most participants were unable to speak or understand English. It was evident that due to their ongoing mental health challenges, the participants in this cohort could not concentrate on any learning activity. Their mental illness is a key barrier to improving English language skills.

In this context, one participant revealed how he had been unable to pass his citizenship test, saying, *“I practice a lot but don’t do well in the exam- for a mentally ill person, this is not working”*.

“I can read, write but can’t speak English because I can’t remember anything due to my mental health issues”, said another elder participant.

4. COVID-19 IMPACT (COHORT 4: AFGHAN MALE ELDERS SEPARATED FROM FAMILIES OVERSEAS)

All participants during this consultation agreed that the pre-existing distress and mental health issues had heightened with the arrival of COVID-19. One participant expressed the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic, saying, *“We have ten times more problems now”*.

During the discussion, elders conceded that their isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, loss of self-esteem, guilt, helplessness and vulnerability had spiked after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The lockdown restrictions and limited interactions with friends had also ignited in them the fear of losing connection with their mother tongue. One participant talked about COVID-19 impacts saying, *“because I am alone all the time and never spoke to anyone, I feel I was forgetting even my mother tongue”*.

The overall conclusion was that the root cause of all issues experienced by this group of Afghan male elders remained unchanged before and after the beginning of COVID-19, and that was the uncertainty of their visa status and extended separation from their families. However, many consequential difficulties, e.g. health-physical, mental, and emotional, financial, housing, social and learning challenges, etc., had intensified after COVID-19 started.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(CONSULTATION COHORT 4: AFGHAN MALE ELDERS)

RECOMMENDATION 1

Australian immigration policies should be reviewed for refugees and asylum seekers

The key recommendation is that the Australian Government amend the immigration policies for refugees and asylum seekers on humanitarian grounds. This includes:

- i. Review the tough visa conditions on TPV and provide a pathway to TPV/SHEV/Bridging visa holders for permanent settlement in Australia
- ii. Immediately grant permanent visas to all Afghan refugees and asylum seekers on temporary protection and bridging visas
- iii. Immediate processing of visa applications to bring the families of all Afghan refugees to Australia.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Media, local Government, community organisations and community should play a stronger advocacy role for changes to refugee/asylum seekers visa policy

There should be concerted efforts at all levels, whether local government, community organisations, or grassroots communities, to advocate and lobby for the refugee/humanitarian visa policy changes.

Local and national media should highlight the plight of Afghan elderly refugees leading a lonely and distressful life while waiting for their family reunion.

Local and national media should bring awareness and visibility to the trials and tribulations of male elders as a vast majority of the local community do not have this comprehension.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Enhanced and expanded support networks for Afghan male elders should be established (e.g. Afghan Elders Support Group/Association)

The local Council and Ethnic Council Shepparton should partner with other community groups governments to develop social events, indoor and outdoor activities, outings and other exclusive programs for male elders in this cohort. A support group for Afghan elders separated from their families should be established to help address their social isolation. The group should ensure that elders are engaged in various activities and programs such as social outings and gatherings, Eid celebrations, gentle exercise, etc. These elders are often excluded from socialising opportunities within their community.

These programs can positively impact Afghan elders' health, well-being, and ageing. (This report acknowledges that social events and programs will only bring temporary relief or respite for elders and will not address the core problem of separation from their families due to visa regulations).

RECOMMENDATION 4

Improve the safety of Afghan male elders and build their trust with the Police department

- i. Organise programs for Afghan elders such as meeting the local police/multicultural liaison officer to develop trust and confidence with local police
- ii. Arrange information sessions for male elders to caution them against dubious lawyers and immigration agents

CONCLUSION

Shepparton is home to a large Afghan community that adds value to the multicultural landscape of this region. Most of Shepparton's Afghan community members came to Australia as refugees and asylum seekers. This consultation brought to light a wide array of issues impacting Shepparton's Afghan community before and after the advent of COVID-19. The consultation also included suggestions on actions, programs, and policies to address these issues and helped develop the recommendations included in this report. It is likely that many services and programs at various levels will only need tweaking and enhancement to align with the recommendations contained in this report. In contrast, some recommended actions might need to be introduced as new concepts. Overall, these recommendations will require ownership by relevant organisations and levels of Government, appropriate resources, continuity and consistency, and a strong will and determination to act and deliver for achieving positive outcomes for Shepparton's Afghan community.

ANNEXES

1. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PARTICIPANTS:

	Youth Age: (18-25 yrs)	Women Age: Above 25 yrs	Men Age: Above 25 yrs	Elders Above 60 yrs
Sample size	32	16	19	17 15 out of 17 (separated from families overseas)
Gender	Male: 13 Female: 19	Female	Male	Male
Ethnicity:	Hazara (31) Blank (1)	Hazara (16)	Hazara (18) Blank (1)	Hazara (17)
Occupation:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student (24) • Part-time employment (6) • Full-time employment (8) • Casual worker (4) • Unemployed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students (3) • Part-time employment (3) • Full-time employment (3) • Housewife (8) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full-time employment (8) • Casual worker (4) • Part-time worker (1) • Unemployed (6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casual worker (1) • Unemployed (16)
Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 			
Visa Status:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent Resident (18) • Partner visa (2) • Humanitarian (1) • Australian Citizen (10) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent Resident (5) • Australian Citizen (4) • Unknown (7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent Resident (6) • Australian Citizen (8) • TPV/SHEV (4) • Unknown (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanent Residents (5) • Australian Citizen (1) • Unknown: 1 • Temporary Protection Visa (10) = <i>Bridging Visa (2), SHEV (7), TPV785 (1)</i>

	Youth Age: (18-25 yrs)	Women Age: Above 25 yrs	Men Age: Above 25 yrs	Elders Above 60 yrs
Birth Place	Overseas (32)	Overseas	Overseas, Afghanistan	Overseas, Afghanistan
Year of Arrival in Australia	Earliest Arrival: Y 2001 Latest Arrival: Y 2021	Earliest Arrival: Y 2001 Latest Arrival: Y 2017	Earliest Arrival: 1999 Latest Arrival: 2003	Earliest Arrival: 2011 Latest Arrival: 2014
Year of Arrival in Shepparton	Earliest Arrival: Y 2006 Latest Arrival: Y 2021	Earliest Arrival: Y 2008 Latest Arrival: Y 2017	Earliest Arrival: 2003 Latest Arrival: 2017	Earliest Arrival: 2011 Latest Arrival: 2017
Primary Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hazaragi: 29 • Pushtu: 1 	Dari/Hazaragi	Dari/ Hazaragi:	Dari/ Hazaragi:
Household	Living with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents (1) • Parents, Siblings (28) • Partner (3) 	Living with: Partner & Children: (7) Children (5) Mother & Children: (1) Children: Parents-1	Living with: Partner & Children: 8 Partner (2) Parents (1) Alone (7) Unknown (1)	Living with: Alone (15) Family (2)
Type of property	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rental (17) • Owned- by parents (13) • Shared (2) 	Rental (1) Shared (1) Owned/husband owned (11)	Rental (9) Owned (8) Mortgage (1) Unknown (1)	Rental (17)

2. METHODOLOGY

1. A brainstorming session with the Ethnic Council's staff members (including Afghan community coordinators) was held to design a questionnaire for community consultations. The final Questionnaire included four sections. Section one had questions on the demographic data of the participants. The other three sections included and various open-ended questions to ascertain respondents' views on priority issues and problems (before and after the beginning of COVID-9) and their solutions. (See Questionnaire in the Annex)
2. The community consultation was primarily undertaken via Focus Group Discussions (FGD).
3. An online questionnaire was also developed using Survey Monkey for the Youth cohort). The online Questionnaire was not used for other cohorts due to language translation limitations. Sixteen survey responses from young people were received online.
4. FGD participants were encouraged and enabled to share their opinions and interact to develop better insights into the issues and proposed solutions.
5. The study followed a bottom-up (grassroots) approach in identifying problems and challenges experienced by the community and their proposed solutions. (See Annex: Summary table of the demographic profile of community cohorts included in community consultation.)
6. A total of seven Focus Group Discussions (of 1.5-2.5 hours) were held at different locations. These locations included the Scouts Hall, Afghan mosque, ELC, Nedal Restaurant in Shepparton, and Zoom.
7. FGD participants provided their verbal consent to complete the demographics section of the Questionnaire to collect anonymous demographic data.
8. FGD coordinator helped them complete the Questionnaire. The demographic details were later recorded in Survey Monkey.
9. All FGDs included an interpreter. The discussions were not tape-recorded to encourage participants to have a frank conversation. All discussions were conversation style based where the facilitator took notes during the session.
10. FGDs with young people ensured that those who had already completed the online Survey were not required to complete the paper-based demographic data collection form.
11. Overall, the quality of responses received via the online Questionnaire had insufficient details in open-ended questions.
12. One survey questionnaire was received via email, which was included in the consultation discussion and analysis.

3. ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Project: Study of Greater Shepparton's Afghan community before and after the beginning of COVID 19.

Project Organisation: Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District

Part 1- Demographics

1. Gender (M/F/other)
2. Age:
3. Ethnicity (Hazara/other- specify)
4. Occupation:(employed full time, part-time, casual / unemployed / housewife / student)
5. Were you born in Australia or overseas?
6. If born overseas, what was the year of arrival in Australia?
7. Year of arrival in Shepparton?
8. Visa status/Visa Type?
9. Primary Language spoken at home?
10. Do you live/work/study in Shepparton? **(Tick all applicable options)**
11. Do you live alone (yes/no)?
12. If no to 9, please indicate other members in your household (Parents, Siblings, Children, others)
13. What type of property do you live (in Shepparton)? Rental, owned, shared property?

Part 2- Before COVID-19

- 1 What were the three main issues that you experienced before COVID-19 started?

Issue 1:

Issue 2:

Issue 3:

- 2 How did these issues impact you (e.g. work, studies, health, shopping, social interactions, other)?

- 3 What programs/services/help did you use to address these issues?

Example:

Vic. Police/Uniting care/ Health/Estate Agents/Ethnic Council/Family Violence Support/Drug and Alcohol Rehab Services/Greater Shepparton City Council/School/University

Part 3- Beginning of COVID-19 in 2020

1 What were the three main issues that you experienced after the beginning of COVID-19? (That is, what did you find difficult in COVID?)

Issue 1:

Issue 2:

Issue 3:

2 How did these issues impact you (e.g. work, studies, health, shopping, social interactions, other)?

3 What programs/services/help did you use to address these issues?

Example:

Vic. Police/Uniting care/ Health/Estate Agents/Ethnic Council/Family Violence Support/Drug and Alcohol Rehab Services/Greater Shepparton City Council/School/University

4 What service/action/support did you find was most helpful during COVID/lockdown?

Part 4- COVID-19 Support Ideas/Suggestions

What programs (services, actions, events, support) do you suggest should be available to address the COVID related issues outlined (in Part 3) above?

Any other comment:

Thank you for your time. We appreciate your feedback.