

# Case study: Leading change towards inclusive practice

## Beyond Translation – Rethinking Inclusive Volunteering

**The Grampians region, and Ballarat in particular, is becoming increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. This reflects the broader national trends, with 22% of people across Australia speaking a language other than English at home. Migration continues to drive population growth and community change in positive ways.**

However, many volunteering involving organisations continue to operate in ways that assume:

- English fluency
- Familiarity with systems, and
- Confidence navigating formal processes.

This creates structural barriers to participation, particularly for newly arrived migrants and refugees.

We use language every day to get our ideas across, to let people know how we feel, and to understand what's expected of us. Language is not neutral, rather it shapes who feels included, who participates, and who is able to act.

### **The challenge**

Volunteer involving organisations across the Grampians region face a dual challenge of declining volunteer participation overall, and underrepresentation of multicultural communities.

Key barriers we identified together with newly arrived migrants in Ballarat include:

- Recruitment materials only in English
- Complex, text-heavy application processes
- Limited use of trusted community channels,
- Cultural misalignment in how volunteering is described and promoted.

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Importantly, the issue is not just providing volunteering materials in multiple languages. Translation alone doesn't remove barriers if it is poorly timed, culturally misaligned, or delivered through unfamiliar channels. This means many potential volunteers are not disengaged – but rather they are simply not being reached effectively.

### **What's driving exclusion?**

The Ballarat Foundation held a civility workshop in 2026 attended by the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council (BRMC) whose members noted that people often make several unhelpful assumptions around newly arrived communities that reinforces exclusion:

1. We tend to say multicultural communities in the region are “new” or peripheral
2. We often hear that migrants are service users, not contributors
3. A common theme is that participation required assimilation (e.g. fit in first and then contribute)
4. Regional centres like the Grampians are less capable of inclusion.

These widely held assumptions obscure the existing and real contributions made by multicultural communities to the region for the last two centuries and isolate migrant communities even further. These beliefs reduce newly arrived migrants' confidence to participate and unintentionally position volunteering as “not for me”.

Evidence shows that when people are supported early with language, connections and access, that participation in volunteering (and other community activities) increases significantly.

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### What can Volunteer Involving Organisations do?

To encourage more participation in volunteering for newly arrived migrants, there needs to be a shift away from a focus on translation being the barrier to one where we encourage inclusion by design.

Some key take-away messages from the migrant community focus on **intentional inclusion**:

#### **1. Co-designing with communities**

Inclusion is most effective when it is intentional, and co-designing with the migrant community is a good place to start. Co-design does not mean holding a design workshop. In one workshop held by the Ballarat Foundation early in our efforts to understand cultural barriers, a member of the Sudanese community pointed out the misconception that everyone comes to the table with the same social capital. We were reminded that many newly arrived migrants – and even some long-established migrants – come with lower social capital, language barriers and settlement fatigue.

Being asked to come to the table on the host's terms is not neutral; it carries a cost for many multicultural participants. To address this, co-design principles should be embedded in places where trust already exists so that the burden of participation is reduced. This could include going into existing multicultural community spaces, such as faith groups, language groups or multicultural associations, and building insight through informal conversations rather than structured sessions.

#### **2. Reduce the cognitive and emotional load**

In one of the Breaking the Barrier workshops held by the Ballarat Foundation, a member of the Chinese community said that when people tell him to “go back to where you come from”, he responds with smiles and love. However, he also shared that constantly having to smile and stay guarded is draining, both cognitively and emotionally. Participation in volunteering should require minimal preparation from people from diverse cultural backgrounds. As volunteer-involving

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organisations, we should not assume prior knowledge of formal volunteering. We should be open to using story prompts instead of formal questions, and to accepting partial participation rather than an all-or-nothing approach.

### **3. Use trusted intermediaries**

Newly arrived migrants often rely on community leaders, bilingual workers and peer networks. Rather than relying only on direct recruitment, volunteer-involving organisations should identify trusted connectors and build relationships with them to help mediate participation. The Ballarat Foundation has been invited to several morning teas at the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council (BRMC) to discuss what formal volunteering means and answer questions in a culturally safe environment.

### **4. Make participation useful**

During our Breaking Down Barriers workshops in 2025, common feedback received by the Ballarat Foundation team from people with lived experience was that “we give input, but nothing changes”. Engagement of this kind, where people are effectively being asked to “help us make you fit our system better”, can feel extractive and lead to disengagement. One way to avoid this is to move away from formal consultation sessions and instead learn together. We found that partnering with local cultural groups and holding more informal discussions led to stronger engagement and better insights. If consultation sessions are used, it is important to return to groups and explain how their input led to change – or if it didn’t, to say that clearly as well.

### **5. Create bridging opportunities**

We need to find ways to build social capital, not just draw on it. Many volunteer-involving organisations extract relational capital by asking for input and participation without investing in the conditions that allow people to build networks, confidence and influence. Many migrant groups already have strong bonding social capital within their own networks. What is often missing is bridging capital – opportunities to connect across different groups. When considering recruitment, volunteer-involving organisations need to help create that bridge first.

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Creating bridging opportunities takes time and does not happen overnight. It requires building familiarity and trust. This could involve partnering on a community meal or attending regular morning teas held by organisations such as the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council. The key is to add value and build trust, rather than asking, “Can you promote our volunteering program?”

### ***6. Make your organisation visible in culturally relevant ways***

An important message the Ballarat Foundation heard from multicultural groups in Ballarat was that many communities have strong traditions of mutual support, where helping others is embedded in everyday life. These forms of contribution are often relational, reciprocal and ongoing, rather than organised through formal volunteering structures. If people have not encountered formal volunteering in their cultural context, it may fall outside their mental model. People are less likely to engage if they do not see themselves reflected in the way volunteering is presented. It is important that materials about formal volunteering use images and stories of diverse volunteers and highlight real examples of contribution. Visibility is not just about awareness. Visual cues signal who an organisation is for, how participation works, and whether people can see themselves in it.

### **Why this all matters**

Inclusive volunteering is not simply about increasing participation. It is about ensuring that the systems we rely on to support our communities reflect the people who live in them.

Across the Grampians region, multicultural communities are already contributing in meaningful and often unseen ways through family networks, cultural groups and community connections. The opportunity for volunteer-involving organisations is not to create participation from scratch, but to recognise, value and connect with these existing forms of contribution.

When language, culture and access are considered together, volunteering becomes more than a transactional exchange of time. It becomes a pathway to connection, confidence and belonging.

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If organisations continue to design volunteering around assumed norms of language, confidence and familiarity, they will continue to exclude people who could contribute most.

However, when inclusion is built in from the start – through culturally relevant communication, trusted relationships and flexible pathways – participation expands, trust deepens, and communities become more connected.



*BRMC colleague, Nyadol Nyuon at the Ballarat Foundation Civility Workshop speaking with members of the Menzies Foundation*

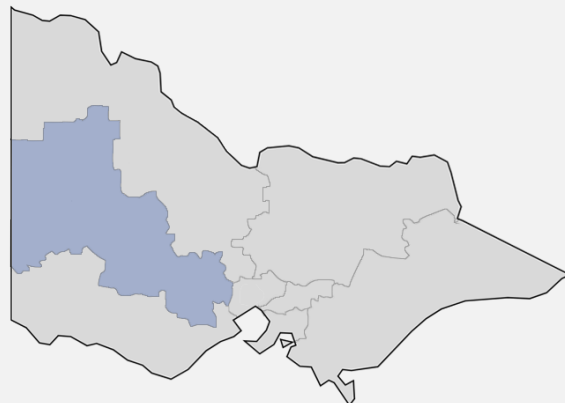
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<https://www.volunteeringvictoria.org.au/leading-volunteers/vma-2022-2026/>



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*Volunteering Victoria acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea, and community. We pay our respect to Elders past and present.*