

Asylum Seeker Policy

Category	All employees, contractors, volunteers and visitors
Date of Adoption by Council	8 December 2015
Directorate Responsibility	Community Services

Policy

The City of Whittlesea's Asylum Seeker Policy is consistent with the Local Government Joint Statement in support of asylum seekers living in the community signed by the City of Whittlesea August 2014. It affirms Council's on-going commitment to support asylum seekers living within the Whittlesea municipality as valued residents and is a pledge to welcome them, treat them with respect and honour their dignity.

"The City of Whittlesea recognises the inherent dignity of asylum seekers and their right to participate in and contribute to the life of the community; and will assure they have fair and equitable access to Council services".

Council recognises that although asylum seekers may have a limited visa status, their right to be understood and to exercise their basic human rights is not diminished.

Policy Principles

The Asylum Seeker policy principles are designed to underpin the policy and guide Council action.

- As a local Council we respect the asylum seekers who live, work or study in the municipality and their right to participate in and contribute to the life of the Whittlesea community
- We recognise their human rights, struggle, resilience and determination to create a safe and secure future for themselves and their families
- We recognise and value their skills, life experiences and contributions to the development and diversity of our community

- We commit to welcoming asylum seekers into our community
- We will strive to protect their health and wellbeing and advocate for their rights to be treated with respect and dignity.

Objectives

The key objectives of Council's Asylum Seeker policy are to:

1. Provide accurate information to Council staff, local service providers and the community on the needs of asylum seekers, existing services or referral pathways
2. Ensure that asylum seekers have fair and equitable access to Council services
3. Develop and distribute positive, accurate communications and messaging that reflects Council's commitment to welcome and support asylum seekers
4. Facilitate connections between asylum seekers, the broader community and local services providers
5. Advocate to the Victorian and Commonwealth Government to generate positive outcomes for local asylum seekers.

Terminology

The United Nations Refugee Convention defines a refugee as "a person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.'

In the community the terms Refugee and Asylum Seeker are often used interchangeably, yet they are different. A refugee is someone who has been granted the right to seek protection in a country other than their own for fear of persecution if they return home. An asylum seeker is someone who seeks this right but is yet to have it assessed and granted.

Context and Rationale

The exact number of asylum seekers residing in the City of Whittlesea is difficult to ascertain given the Federal government's reluctance to release accurate data however, in 2014 Council estimated that there are approximately 930 asylum seekers living within the City of Whittlesea.

The City of Whittlesea acknowledges that many asylum seekers have experienced a transitory and different life to that of the majority of our residents. Establishing community connections and finding meaningful ways to contribute to or participate locally often proves challenging especially in cases where access to paid employment is uncertain. In response to this Council offers employment support for asylum seekers through its Work Ready program.

At its meeting of 5 August 2014, Council became a signatory to the Local Government: *Joint Statement in support of asylum seekers living in the community*, recognising amongst other things, the position that asylum seekers are some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community, often going without the services they need, spending prolonged amounts of time in community detention, and facing an uncertain future.

Council recognised that asylum seekers have been part of Whittlesea's diverse community for many years and have been and remain important contributors to Whittlesea's economic and social wellbeing.

Council is in a unique position at the local level to facilitate community based solutions. It can achieve this by providing fair and equitable access to Council services, leadership and advocacy, service coordination and support for local service providers and by creating opportunities for local participation.

Council's asylum seeker policy is in line with our commitment as a Refugee Welcome Zone, made in 2002 to welcome refugees, uphold their human rights, demonstrate compassion and enhance cultural and religious diversity.

This policy is also in keeping with Council's commitment to the Whittlesea Community Futures Partnership, to promote harmony and building support for diversity and reducing race based discrimination, which in turn is central to promoting healthy people and healthy communities.

Key Linkages

The Asylum Seeker policy has links to the following documents:

International

Australia is a signatory to the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), adopted by the United Nations on 10 December 1948 and to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966.

Commonwealth

- The People of Australia: Australia's Multicultural Policy 2011
- Multicultural Access and Equity Policy: Respecting diversity: Improving responsiveness 2013
- Racial Discrimination Act 1975
- National Anti-Racism Strategy
- Australia's Human Rights Framework

Victorian Government

- Victoria's Advantage – *Unity, Diversity, Opportunity* 2013

The Victorian Government's Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship Policy recognises that each and every Victorian plays a part in contributing to and shaping the future of the state, by valuing and embracing our diversity, Victoria can continue to realise the benefits of a cohesive and multicultural society. The policy states that *"with timely, holistic and needs-based support, individuals and families from humanitarian backgrounds, including refugees and asylum seekers who have fled persecution and, in many cases, survived trauma and loss, can begin to rebuild their lives and flourish in their new homeland"*.

- **Multicultural Victoria Act 2011**
- **Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001**
- **Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 2010**
- **Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006.**

Local Government

- **Australian Local Government Association Services for All – promoting Access and Equity in local government**
- **MAV Statement of Commitment to Cultural Diversity 2012.**

City Of Whittlesea

- **Whittlesea 2030, Strategic Community Plan 2013**
- **City of Whittlesea Multicultural Action Plan 2014-2018**
- **City of Whittlesea Connect: A municipal plan for young children, young people and their families 2013-2018.**
- **Building Respect: Whittlesea’s Anti-Racism Strategy 2015-2019**