

# Summary Report

## Community Strengthening and Engagement Project (CSEP)

**Prepared for Office of Multicultural Affairs and  
Citizenship and Community Relations  
Commission**

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### Document review and authorisation

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## Community Strengthening and Engagement Project

The Community Strengthening and Engagement Project (the CSE Project)<sup>1</sup> was implemented by the Community Relations Commission (CRC) in New South Wales and the Office for Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship (OMAC) in Victoria from 2011 to 2014. It was funded annually over the four years under the National Framework to Counter Violent Extremism (CVE).

The Project aimed to address the following agreed outcomes under the National CVE Framework:

- To build community cohesion and the resilience of communities
- To achieve effective communications which challenge violent extremist messages and support positive alternatives.

Accepting that it is the responsibility of government and society more broadly to support citizens and communities who are being actively targeted by extremist recruiters, the Project brought together Muslim and non-Muslim youth, community leaders and community organisations, religious and educational institutions, peak bodies and government to work towards the common goal of countering violent extremism and building community cohesion.

The Project was built on the premise that building the capacity of citizens (particularly young people) to engage with community organisations and services, generating strong inter-organisational and intercultural relationships and dialogue, and facilitating open debate on sensitive issues in safe environments, can all help build community strength and resilience and set a positive example of intercultural harmony to counter extremist influences. Following this premise, the two outcomes under the National CVE Framework were expanded to four Project outcomes:

1. Greater sense of hope in the possibility for positive change in the Muslim and wider community
2. Muslim and other organisations work together more to address common concerns
3. Sustainable networks, relationships of trust, and lines of communication are developed within and between communities, and/or OMAC and CRC
4. Positive messages and practical examples of intercultural cooperation are provided to counter anti-Islamic & anti-Western narratives.

CRC and OMAC engaged independent consultancy Clear Horizon to evaluate the CSE Project throughout its duration. This report presents a summary of what the evaluation found. It draws upon a more extensive, in-depth evaluation report.

The CSE Project ran over four years with funding totalling \$1.7 million across two states. The Project focused mostly on working with young people. It did this by initiating and strengthening relationships with multiple small and medium-sized organisations or grassroots groups and fostering partnerships between Muslim and non-Muslim stakeholders. Project staff worked closely with these stakeholders and their partners to support the development of their own project ideas and to take them through a process of applying for grants.

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<sup>1</sup> The Project was known under different names in NSW and Victoria, reflecting somewhat different approaches. In NSW, the Project was referred to as the Community Engagement Project and focused on engaging communities across cultural and religious differences. In Victoria, the Project focused more on strengthening the capacity of Muslim community organisations to engage with other communities, and was referred to as the Community Strengthening Project.

The Project gave more than 50 grants, ranging from \$5,000 - \$30,000, for community engagement activities, facilitated a series of youth-focused community forums and debates, and developed a social networking project. CRC and OMAC employed project coordinators, who engaged community coordinators with knowledge, expertise and connections in local Muslim communities. Funded projects included intercultural dialogue events, community sport competitions, community arts, employment, and civic education (e.g. law, governance and human rights etc.), leadership training, training in how to engage with media, and more. Grant recipients and partner organisations were Muslim and non-Muslim organisations of varying sizes and capacities.

The differences in context and perceived needs in the two states shaped some differences in their approach to community engagement. First, the CRC brokered relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim communities and built these into funding criteria, with the aim of strengthening connections between communities. OMAC funded some projects that aimed to strengthen the capacity of isolated Muslim groups in preparation for their forming better connections with non-Muslim communities. Second, NSW participants in an early community consultation prompted formation of a network of young people, who worked with the CRC project coordinators to lead face to face and social media forums for dialogue. The CRC then divided effort equally across this stream of work (the Project Support Network) and two others - community liaison and grant administration. Third, in Victoria, the project was organised around a relationship with the Islamic Council of Victoria as the state's most representative body for Muslim community organisations. In NSW, the CRC worked instead with a range of different Muslim communities.

The Project's approaches, delivered in a culturally respectful and responsive manner, attracted highly positive feedback throughout the project. Participants highlighted the honesty and transparency of project staff and their willingness to listen to community voices. As a result, for some groups, this was their first experience of working in partnership with government.

The collaboration between CRC and OMAC staff was appropriate, reflecting that the Sydney and Melbourne Muslim communities are intrinsically connected.

## What the project achieved

The evaluation found the Project to be moderately effective. The approaches in both states were highly regarded and well-received and the Project achieved some good outcomes.

Given the high level outcomes the Project set out to attain, and the inherent complexities of the issue the Project sought to address, moderate effectiveness is considered a substantial and noteworthy achievement for the Project. There are many valuable lessons to be learned from this Project for CRC and OMAC, and for other CVE practitioners working directly with communities.

The evaluation looked at achievement across three main areas:

- youth participation and engagement
- interpersonal and inter-organisational relationships and collaboration, and
- messaging and knowledge sharing.

Most projects that involved **young people** demonstrated evidence that Muslim young people were gaining the self-esteem, confidence and skills to take part in Muslim and non-Muslim community programs and activities. Participation introduced them to legitimate avenues for addressing their concerns. There is also some evidence of higher level outcomes, including a willingness to engage with each other, within and across communities and faiths, in social, economic and political activities. The program considers

these changes to be important elements leading to improved social cohesion, civic participation and sense of connectedness.

In terms of **relationships and collaboration**, some applicable projects demonstrated Muslim and other organisations collaborating more frequently and more effectively with each other and with OMAC/CRC. These projects led to Muslim and other organisations being more aware of shared aims and interests and identifying opportunities for collaboration where appropriate. There is evidence that community members are more motivated and have enhanced capacity to engage across communities towards common goals. Some projects involving Muslim and non-Muslim community members or organisations demonstrated increased engagement between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. In addition, some potentially sustainable networks developed among organisations, communities and OMAC/CRC.

The project demonstrated some effective **messaging**. In some applicable projects there is evidence of participants sharing accounts of positive experiences with the wider community, and participants are reporting that the Project has led to greater awareness in the wider community of how Muslims and people of other faiths are working together, or that Muslims are active members of the community. The Project has been active in challenging sensitive or negative messaging detrimental to social cohesion, through face to face and online engagement.

**Knowledge sharing** is also occurring: staff have reflected upon, documented and communicated project learnings.

### Did the benefits last?

The Project's legacy was evaluated in terms of participant benefits, organisation or group capacity, organisational relationships, and continuing Project-inspired activities.

Some **participants** reported that the benefits of their participation continued beyond the CRC/OMAC-funded activity, and that they have applied to other initiatives the skills or knowledge gained through their participation. Most participants consulted reported that the project activity enabled them to connect with people of other faiths, and/or enabled them to connect with people of their own faith, and that these relationships endured beyond the project activities.

Most of the organisations leading or involved in project implementation ('partner organisations') reported that the project activity increased their **organisational capacity**, and important step towards community capacity, and that this increase has endured beyond the funding period. Where **organisational relationships** were concerned, most of the partner organisations consulted reported being either in contact, or comfortable contacting, their implementing partner(s). They saw benefits as a result of their collaboration and were positive about their relationship with CRC/ OMAC. Some organisations have made contact with other partner(s) to explore the possibility of working together. Several **project activities** have continued beyond the funding period in original or modified form, or have provided a basis for further initiatives. The evidence of sustainability is significant, in the context of relatively small grants and short-term activities.

### Recommendations

The evaluation findings were discussed in a reflection workshop with Project staff and key stakeholders from both states. There was consensus amongst workshop participants that future similar work should build on the Project's strengths, and that government agencies should continue to work on positive messaging and on creative engagement with young people.