



The People's Report #1: Exploring community-led action to address discrimination in Merri-bek

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Disclaimer:

This project was supported by Merri-bek City Council. However, the findings and recommendations presented in *The People's Report* are those of the authors and participants and do not necessarily reflect the views of Merri-bek City Council.



We acknowledge Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waterways in the area now known as Merri-bek. We acknowledge that sovereignty of those lands has never been ceded and right of all First Nations people to self-determination. We celebrate and pay respect to Elders past and present.

Photo credit: An image of the Ballerit Mooroop site by Petr Svoboda.

The People's Report

is a project designed to provide deeper, more nuanced understanding of issues important to community in a way that is underpinned by a strong connection, sense of trust and a model of reciprocity.

For this pilot project, we put community members at the centre of researching an important issue – discrimination. We recruited, trained and supported people from Merri-bek to develop and run a community engagement process within their own communities. Together we worked on agreed research questions, and each Community Researcher engaged their communities in ways that were distinctly appropriate for their network. Through this process, Community Researchers were able to speak directly with those that shared common ground and with whom they already have a sense of connection and trust. As this Report shows, the process led to more in-depth and nuanced responses. Following engagement with their communities, Community Researchers reconvened to collaboratively analyse their data and determine the recommendations presented here. The methodology and its evaluation are documented in detail in an accompanying Evaluation Report (see contact details at the end of this document).



Stage One: Five Community Researchers recruited from Merri-bek and trained in community engagement, ethical research, and facilitation.



Stage Two: Community Researchers supported to develop an Engagement Plan and conduct interviews with their networks.



Stage Three: Community Researchers shared data and analysed it to identify consistent themes and propose recommendations.

Community Researchers

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Research questions:

- How can we make our communities more welcoming, where people are less likely to experience discrimination?
- How can we support communities to feel more capable and motivated to respond to discrimination?

Who was engaged in the research?

Community Researchers spoke with 64 people across the community and were able to gain insightful perspectives from conversations with individuals from diverse ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, reflecting the richness of the local community.

These included:

- People from Pakistani, Nepalese, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Greek, Turkish, Bangladeshi, Indian, Lebanese, Chinese and Australian-born backgrounds.
- Mainly migrants who have been in Australia for varying periods (from less than a year to decades), that moved to Australia as international students, employment or 'for a better quality of life'.
- People aged 18 to over 70 years old.
- People from a range of faith backgrounds including Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and non-practicing.
- People from a range of professions such as electronics engineer, senior accountant, researchers, dentists, teachers, software developer, mechanics, cleaner, used car dealership owner, doctor, university graduates specialising in science and technology, construction manager, business owners and retired individuals.

Some interviews were conducted in Urdu and Nepalese.

How did we analyse the data?

The analysis of the data from interviews was conducted in three key phases.

Phase One: Individual Community Researcher Reflection

Each Community Researcher began by preparing an Analysis Report. These reports included demographic details of the individuals interviewed, recurring themes that emerged, any differing or conflicting perspectives, and suggestions shared by participants for addressing discrimination — including unconventional or creative ideas. Community Researchers also noted any standout moments or insights that particularly resonated with them during the conversations.

Phase Two: Collaborative Analysis Workshop

On Saturday, 15 March, all Community Researchers participated in an analysis workshop. During this session, they presented the findings from their individual Analysis Reports. They began by reflecting independently, identifying connections or contradictions between the themes found in their own data. These insights were then discussed as a group to collaboratively identify four overarching themes for this report. Based on these common themes, the group co-developed targeted suggestions and recommendations, drawing from both the research findings and their personal reflections.

Phase Three: From Recommendations to Action Workshop

Recognising that further work was needed to clarify how recommendations could translate into concrete action, a follow-up workshop was convened on 9 September 2025 with Community Researchers and Merri-bek City Council staff. In this session, participants explored what it would mean for actions to be genuinely community-led, identified the types of support needed from council, and discussed how responsibility might be shared. Importantly, this workshop also addressed how to “close the loop” with the 64 community members who had contributed their stories.

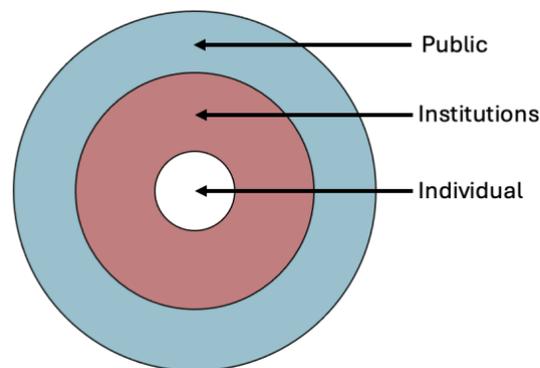
Themes and recommendations

The following are themes and recommendations as expressed in the Community Researchers' Analysis Reports and collectively decided at the analysis workshop.

Theme #1: Education

Participants expressed that education plays a key role in fostering understanding and respect for individuals from diverse racial and religious backgrounds.

Education was considered as a way to address discrimination in three spheres: building individual understanding, strengthening understanding in formal institutions, and improved public awareness initiatives. Together these spheres build on each other to reinforce a sense of belonging as such:



Individual

Strategies for individuals to build their understanding and addressing discrimination were discussed from a variety of perspectives.

Some highlighted individual responsibility in tackling discrimination - Participants believed that addressing discrimination should start at the individual level by encouraging openness to different perspectives and experiences.

“Individuals should learn how to educate themselves about different cultures, need to be willing to listen. You can’t just assume your way is the only way.”

“We don’t need to agree on everything, but we need to learn about each other. It would help people be less afraid of what they don’t understand.”

Many participants shared experiences of being uncertain and not knowing if what they are experiencing is actually discrimination or just ‘Australian culture’. Microaggressions especially confuse people when they have first arrived in Australia.

Greater understanding of the different forms discrimination can take was considered important. Aligned with this, people also want opportunities to learn more about Australian culture and Aboriginal history.

Another group highlighted the importance of peoples' awareness of rights and responsibilities. Community researchers found that many of the participants who were professionals or international students were aware of racial discrimination laws in Australia and expressed because of this they understood the importance of speaking up and taking action when faced with discrimination.

"We know our rights and we should not stay silent. If we don't speak up, nothing will change."

Recommendation:

1. Workshops that help individuals develop empathy and emotional intelligence for different cultures and religions, where people learn about other cultures, including Australian and Aboriginal culture, to support prevention and promotion.

Institutions

Institutions for this Report are formal spaces such as workplaces, schools and universities. All five Community Researchers shared that participant had experienced discrimination at universities and workplaces:

"As someone born here, I remember that our school never taught us how to interact with people from different racial backgrounds. There was always an unspoken fear that we could be separated from our families, just like the Aboriginal children taken into white households."

"Pakistani migrants rarely get leadership roles because we are not seen as capable."

"Teachers interact more with Aussie students and don't engage with us much. It feels isolating."

This suggests workplaces, universities and schools are important spaces for action.

"I strongly recommend each individuals, especially those are from other cultures, to make allies at work, at school. That way, individual confidence can be strengthened and there's no room for discrimination between the cultures."

Community Researchers stressed the importance of anti-discrimination, bystander and unconscious bias training to promote understanding in workplaces. They also noted that there should be more religious and cultural awareness learning in the curriculum of formal education settings like schools and universities. Even if a school is a public school, knowing about different religions is important for awareness.

Recommendations:

2. Introduce community-led story-telling and ‘cultural buddy’ programs where people from different backgrounds are paired together for mutual learning and understanding about discrimination in a safe supportive environment. The one-on-one support is important so people feel they can share their experiences and offer advice.
3. Support building allies at schools – this should include more cultural education at schools, but not necessarily only about different cultures, also about the values that are important for a multicultural society.
4. Promoting diversity in workplace/community organisations, e.g. anti-discrimination, bystander and unconscious bias training. Also, creating Multicultural Business Networks, mentorship programs, newsletters, materials in workplaces in different languages, public areas so that people feel a stronger sense of belonging and safety.
5. To highlight businesses that are committed to fostering diversity and inclusion, introduce a certification or “diversity-friendly” badge for businesses that actively promote inclusivity, whether through hiring diverse staff, offering culturally relevant products, or engaging with the local community in meaningful ways.

Public

The final sphere is about public opinion which participants believed plays a crucial role in shaping discrimination in communities. Several factors influence how societal biases develop and persist, often reinforcing stereotypes or, conversely, promoting inclusivity.

“Wearing the hijab makes me feel like I have to constantly prove I belong here.”

Community Researchers also noted that media representation plays an important role in ‘normalising diversity’.

Recommendations:

6. Greater engagement and interaction with individuals from diverse cultural and gender backgrounds needs to occur beyond only sharing food or at festivals – there have to be opportunities for deeper understanding.
7. Develop a public campaign showcasing real stories of individuals who have faced discrimination, to foster awareness and empathy.
8. Increase information that communicates anti-discrimination policies and principles in public spaces to reinforce public education – including information that helps people distinguish what is or isn’t discrimination.

Theme #2: Language

Community researchers found language plays a crucial role in shaping a sense of belonging and combating discrimination in a variety of ways.

Barriers to participation

Participants shared that seeing their own language in the community, school and public areas makes them feel valued, included and a stronger connection to the community.

“When I was a kid, there was no Chinese in the city council’s newsletters, and I had to translate for my parents to help them understand what was happening in our area. I barely remember when the city council finally started including Chinese in some leaflets and newsletters. Suddenly, my parents felt acknowledged—as if we were truly part of the community. It was a moment of respect and recognition.”

Recommendation:

9. Increased and greater promotion of different languages via community organisations and initiatives like the Merri-bek Connectors program, translators and multilingual staff in public spaces.

Perceptions of competency

Participants reported feeling like they were being discriminated against, or judged negatively, based on their language proficiency or accent.

“English is a language, not a measure of intelligence.”

“Because of my accent people assume I don’t understand them and try to talk down to me.”

Recommendation:

10. Promote and encourage people to be more open to different levels of language competency rather than discourage them only because of English fluency.

Visibility of languages in public spaces

Seeing different languages on public signage, official documentation builds a sense of belonging and acceptance for people who speak different languages and also ‘normalises’ the fact that there are many people who speak different language.

Recommendation:

11. Increase the amount of signage with different languages in public signage/information/announcements etc. to reinforce sense of belonging.

Theme #3: Leadership

Representation and the topic of how leaders represent their communities was a common theme, including access to leadership roles and positions.

Community Researchers highlighted that there needs to be more representation of different cultural groups in leadership roles such as elected representatives, this also includes greater gender representation and people of different faiths. They discussed that community support in building leadership as important.

Representation matters. When people see individuals of various cultural, ethnic, and gender backgrounds in leadership positions, they feel a stronger sense of belonging and safety. It reassures the public that their voices are heard, their concerns are understood, and their identities are valued.

Also need to consider how leaders represent their communities and how people can access leadership roles and positions within communities. Some participants talked about discrimination in their own communities, they felt that some long term, established community members were unwelcoming or dismissive toward newcomers.

"When I first arrived, I expected my own people to support me but instead, I felt judged and excluded."

Recommendations:

12. Establish mentorship initiatives that connect aspiring leaders from diverse backgrounds with experienced professionals. This can include working with community leaders to encourage them to support more recently arrived members of their community.
13. Advocate for diversity quotas and transparent hiring processes to increase diverse representation in leadership.
14. Strengthening community networks (perhaps through a Community Leaders Network) that also trains community leaders on how to respond to discrimination and provide support/advocacy for people facing challenges.
15. Encourage grassroots leadership by supporting community to deliver projects that uplift diverse voices and for individuals from under-represented backgrounds to gain leadership experience.

Theme #4: Public safety and promotion

There was a common concern that current reporting mechanisms for discrimination are not effective, and individuals fear retaliation when speaking out.

“Even if you report something, you’re not sure anything will change. Sometimes it feels like speaking up makes things worse.”

Participants shared difficulties reporting through online forms, and that they need to feel supported. Community Researchers noted that “discrimination is all about feelings”. The suggestions provided by participants suggest that this issue requires building greater trust in reporting platforms through more supportive and human centred responses for speaking up.

Community researchers also noted that, as our community becomes increasingly diverse, it is essential that we have clear, accessible, and safe places where individuals who experience discrimination can seek assistance and find refuge.

Recommendations:

16. Make reporting more ‘humanised’ – tools that are non-intrusive and ensure people feel safe when reporting discrimination. It needs to be a channel where people have a trusted person to talk to and language accessibility.
17. Need visual representations of a ‘safe space’ – e.g. creation of designated "Safe Spaces" or the implementation of a safety house symbol across our community to provide immediate support for individuals facing discrimination or harassment.
18. Support community organisations to develop their own anti-discrimination workshops which are tailored to their community – e.g. Imam based anti-discrimination training.
19. Aligned with Recommendation 8, make resources that support people to report discrimination more accessible, including in different languages, and greater promotion of these resources amongst community groups.

Recommendations table with suggested actions

Recommendation	How this might be turned into action
<p>1. Workshops that help individuals develop empathy and emotional intelligence for different cultures and religions, where people learn about other cultures, including Australian and Aboriginal culture, to support prevention and promotion.</p>	<p>Actions could include using music to connect people with local cultures, demonstrations of song and dance, or a street theatre festival. These could be led by organisations such as the Chinese Museum, international arts and culture associations, yarning networks, faith groups, interdisciplinary groups, or multicultural networks.</p> <p>Council could support this by introducing organisations to local Traditional Owners, providing grants, and offering permits. Council endorsement (e.g. through logos) could also lend legitimacy to these events.</p>
<p>2. Introduce community-led story-telling and ‘cultural buddy’ programs where people from different backgrounds are paired together for mutual learning and understanding about discrimination in a safe supportive environment. The one-on-one support is important so people feel they can share their experiences and offer advice.</p>	<p>This action would need to be delivered in partnership with not-for-profit organisations. It could move toward greater community leadership if communities make the key decisions about program design and delivery.</p>
<p>3. Support building allies at schools – this should include more cultural education at schools, but not necessarily only about different cultures, also about the values that are important for a multicultural society.</p>	<p>This action would need to be delivered in partnership with public and private schools and working with interfaith leaders. It could be run through wellbeing officers at schools, or delivered through sport, arts, and after-school programs.</p>
<p>4. Promoting diversity in workplace/community organisations, e.g. anti-discrimination, bystander and unconscious bias training. Also, creating Multicultural Business Networks, mentorship programs, newsletters, materials in workplaces in different languages, public</p>	<p>This recommendation could be turned into action in several ways.</p> <p>Organisations can start by recognising whether their workforce and leadership are diverse and then recommending practical steps to improve representation. Businesses that demonstrate good practice could be recognised and supported, with particular focus on ensuring cultural diversity across all levels of leadership.</p>

<p>areas so that people feel a stronger sense of belonging and safety.</p>	<p>Cultural organisations and business associations could lead action, potentially through the development of Multicultural Business Networks, creating spaces for peer support, sharing resources, and providing mentoring opportunities for emerging leaders from diverse backgrounds. These networks could also support the production of newsletters and materials in multiple languages, distributed both within workplaces and in public areas, to strengthen belonging and safety for all.</p> <p>Council’s role would be to support and amplify these initiatives rather than lead them. This could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing grants or in-kind resources for anti-discrimination and unconscious bias training. • Facilitating partnerships between cultural and business organisations. • Endorsing and promoting businesses that demonstrate inclusive practice. • Supporting mentorship programs by helping connect mentors and mentees. • Linking businesses with specialist training organisations (e.g. for bystander training) so that employers can embed practical tools to prevent and respond to racism.
<p>5. To highlight businesses that are committed to fostering diversity and inclusion, introduce a certification or “diversity-friendly” badge for businesses that actively promote inclusivity, whether through hiring diverse staff, offering culturally relevant products, or engaging with the local community in meaningful ways.</p>	<p>This would need to be Council-led but shared in practice, with community leadership supported by businesses taking responsibility for promoting and embedding the program.</p>
<p>6. Greater engagement and interaction with individuals from diverse cultural and gender backgrounds needs to occur beyond only sharing food or at festivals – there have to be opportunities for deeper understanding.</p>	<p>Aligned with actions from other recommendations, this could be turned into action through initiatives that move beyond symbolic celebrations and instead create spaces for sustained dialogue and collaboration. For example, councils and community organisations could co-host forums, dialogue circles, or joint projects that focus on shared challenges such as housing, climate, or health,</p>

	<p>while weaving in cultural perspectives. Schools, libraries, and sporting clubs could be supported to run ongoing exchange programs that encourage young people to build meaningful cross-cultural friendships.</p> <p>Council could play a support role by offering grants, venues, and facilitation training, while ensuring that communities themselves shape the design and leadership of these activities.</p>
<p>7. Develop a public campaign showcasing real stories of individuals who have faced discrimination, to foster awareness and empathy.</p>	<p>Action could involve community leaders, young people, and others with lived experience, with posters displayed in public places such as library windows (noting the upcoming Place Activation project) or along Sydney Road. This would need to be partnership with Council, as access to public space would be required.</p> <p>It was recognised that it would be difficult to convince individuals to share their stories, so any campaign would need to be sensitive to this issue. Also, there were concerns about the ethical implications of asking people to share their experiences publicly, and whether this might result in their trauma being put on display. These challenges were significant enough that question marks remained over the recommendation itself.</p>
<p>8. Increase information that communicates anti-discrimination policies and principles in public spaces to reinforce public education – including information that helps people distinguish what is or isn't discrimination.</p>	<p>Community could create free online/social media campaigns, with lived-experience voices in messages or videos that explain what discrimination looks and feels like. Note the risk of co-option by community organisations or Council.</p> <p>Could also create spaces for people to tell their stories - for example, the library windows activation in Coburg.</p> <p>Council can support by amplifying messages, providing free venues for meetings, offering psychosocial support (intersectional, across social demographics), and recognising radical behaviours.</p>

<p>9. Increased and greater promotion of different languages via community organisations and initiatives like the Merri-bek Connectors program, translators and multilingual staff in public spaces.</p>	<p>This could be delivered through council programs in partnership with local businesses to reach people in local public spaces (e.g., the Vic Mall coffee shops).</p>
<p>10. Promote and encourage people to be more open to different levels of language competency rather than discourage them only because of English fluency.</p>	<p>This would need to be Council-led, with language aids, translated information, interpreters, and inclusive programming.</p>
<p>11. Increase the amount of signage with different languages in public signage/information/announcements etc. to reinforce sense of belonging.</p>	<p>This could be Council-led, with community indicating where signage is needed, which communities to prioritise, and which languages to use.</p>
<p>12. Establish mentorship initiatives that connect aspiring leaders from diverse backgrounds with experienced professionals. This can include working with community leaders to encourage them to support more recently arrived members of their community.</p>	<p>This could be delivered in partnership between council and community organisations. Community leadership can be strengthened by ensuring community needs are met, involving professionals from small companies, and addressing cultural barriers—e.g., through members’ association groups.</p>
<p>13. Advocate for diversity quotas and transparent hiring processes to increase diverse representation in leadership.</p>	<p>This could be community-led and shared with Council and the media. Increase community leadership by including community members on interview panels or by communities holding businesses accountable.</p>
<p>14. Strengthening community networks (perhaps through a Community Leaders Network) that also trains community leaders on how to respond to discrimination and provide support/advocacy for people facing challenges.</p>	<p>Could build on Democracy Lab, Seeds of Change, Great Idea Program, and Anti-Racism Networks (Hume and Merri-bek). Community organisations include Spectrum, Foundation House, and others, as well as faith groups and the Interfaith Network.</p> <p>Council can support by providing information, funding to access training, and by facilitating connections and networks.</p>
<p>15. Encourage grassroots leadership by supporting community to deliver projects that uplift diverse voices and for individuals from under-represented backgrounds to gain leadership experience.</p>	<p>This recommendation could be turned into action by investing in small-scale, community-led initiatives that provide leadership opportunities. For example, a micro-grants program could enable individuals or groups to trial projects that highlight diverse voices, whether through arts, advocacy, or local service initiatives. Mentorship and peer-learning networks could be developed to support</p>

	<p>new leaders to build confidence and skills, while established community organisations could provide guidance and infrastructure support.</p> <p>Council’s role would be to act as an enabler—facilitating connections, providing seed funding, offering training in areas like governance or project management, and celebrating successes publicly to inspire others. Note: this recommendation is aligned to existing initiatives of Council, namely the Merri-bek Democracy Lab and Seeds of Change.</p>
<p>16. Make reporting more ‘humanised’ – tools that are non-intrusive and ensure people feel safe when reporting discrimination. It needs to be a channel where people have a trusted person to talk to and language accessibility.</p>	<p>This recommendation could be turned into action by recruiting and partnering with local people who have lived experience of discrimination, so that community members feel safe speaking with someone they trust. These reporting champions could provide support, explain options, and help connect individuals to appropriate services.</p> <p>Messaging around reporting should be emotive and reassuring—for example, using statements like “it’s ok to feel like this – get support and report it.”</p> <p>Council could lead the development of a framework to ensure safe and accessible reporting pathways, but the most powerful role would be to support community organisations and leaders to take ownership. This might include providing resources, funding, or training for reporting champions, creating clear promotional materials in multiple languages, and establishing visible markers of safe spaces in schools, libraries, and community venues. In this way, Council provides infrastructure and legitimacy while communities themselves deliver trusted, humanised points of contact.</p>
<p>17. Need visual representations of a ‘safe space’ – e.g. creation of designated "Safe Spaces" or the implementation of a safety house symbol across our community to provide immediate support for individuals facing discrimination or harassment.</p>	<p>Council could lead by developing a consistent framework and materials such as posters, stickers, and digital assets. Community leaders and young people could be involved in co-design to ensure the symbols resonate, with schools and local organisations helping to promote and embed the initiative.</p>

<p>18. Support community organisations to develop their own anti-discrimination workshops which are tailored to their community – e.g. Imam based anti-discrimination training.</p>	<p>Aligned with actions from other recommendations, community organisations such as faith groups, cultural associations, or youth collectives could design and deliver workshops that draw directly on their lived experience and local context.</p> <p>Council could support by providing small grants, free venues, translation services, and help with promotion. A co-design and co-delivery approach could also help ensure the workshops are sustainable and continue to strengthen community capacity over time.</p>
<p>19. Aligned with Recommendation 8, make resources that support people to report discrimination more accessible, including in different languages, and greater promotion of these resources amongst community groups.</p>	<p>Community could take the lead by creating free online and social media campaigns, with people who have lived experience sharing videos or messages that explain what discrimination looks and feels like.</p> <p>Council could support by amplifying these messages, providing free venues for meetings, and ensuring resources are translated and widely distributed. Spaces such as libraries could also be used for community storytelling. Care should be taken to avoid co-option, so that leadership remains with community organisations.</p>

A final note:

This Report is a direct outcome of the work of Community Researchers in **The People's Report #1: Exploring community-led action to address discrimination in Merri-bek**. It provides data and recommendations that the Community Researchers identified through analysis of data they collected from 64 interviews with community members.

This project was also accompanied by an **Evaluation Report** that considered the project methodology and its outcomes. The Evaluation Report is a separate document that outlines the learnings from the project design, outcomes for participants and Community Researchers, and the use of a participatory research approach. Please contact The Public Value Studio at hello@publicvaluestudio.com for a copy of this Evaluation Report.

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