

CASE STUDY

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 percent 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

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

Key barriers the Ballarat Foundation 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.

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 whose members noted that people often make several unhelpful assumptions around newly arrived communities that reinforces exclusion. These include:

- We tend to say multicultural communities in the region are "new"
- We often hear that migrants are service users, not contributors
- A common theme is that participation required assimilation (e.g. fit in first and then contribute)
- 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 migrant's 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.

What can volunteering 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 as being the barrier to one where we encourage inclusion by design. A key take away messages from the migrant community is the need for intentional inclusion.

1. *Co-designing with communities.*

Inclusion occurs when it is intentional and co-designing with the migrant community is a good starting point. Co-design does not mean holding a design workshop. In one such workshop held by the Ballarat Foundation in our early journey to understanding cultural barriers, a long standing member of the migrant community pointed out a misconception that we all come to the table with the same social capital. We were



advised that many newly arrived (and even long established) migrants come to the table with lower social capital, language barriers and settlement fatigue.

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

2. Reduce the cognitive and emotional load.

In our civility workshop a member of the Chinese community, Jack, said that in the face of calls for him to “go back to where you come from”, he responds with smiles and love. However, constantly having to smile and be wary is draining, both cognitively and emotionally. Participation of people from diverse cultural backgrounds in volunteering should require minimal preparation on their part. As volunteering involving organisations, we should not assume any prior knowledge of volunteering. We should be open to using story prompts instead of formal questions and we should accept 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 direct recruitment, volunteer involving organisations should try to identify connectors and build relationships with these connectors so they are able to mediate participation. The Ballarat Foundation has been invited to several morning teas at the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council to discuss what formal volunteering means and to answer questions in a culturally safe environment.

4. Make participation useful

During our breaking down barrier workshops held in 2025, common feedback the Ballarat Foundation team received from people with lived experience was that “we give input, but nothing changes”.

Engagement of this sort, where we are asking people to “help us make you fit our system better” tends to be extractive and makes people disengage. One way of overcoming this is not to hold ‘consultation sessions’ but to learn together. We found that partnering with local cultural groups and having more informal discussions creates more engagement and achieves better results in terms of insight. If consultation sessions are held, it is important to go back to groups and let them know how their input led to change (or even if it didn’t).



5. *Create bridging opportunities*

We need to find ways to try and build social capital, not just draw on it. Many volunteering 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 group networks. What's often missing is bridging capital, or a way to connect across different groups. When looking at ways to recruit, volunteering involving organisations need to create this bridge first.

Creating bridging opportunities doesn't happen overnight and takes time to build familiarity and trust. This could be done by partnering on a community meal, or attending regular morning teas held at organisations such as the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council. The key is to add value and build trust, rather than "can you promote our volunteering program?"

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

Important feedback the Ballarat Foundation received from multicultural groups in Ballarat was that they have strong traditions of mutual support, where helping others is embedded in everyday life. These forms of community contribution are often relational, reciprocal and ongoing, rather than organised through formal volunteering structures. If people haven't encountered formal volunteering in their cultural context, it may sit outside their mental model.

People won't engage in volunteering if they don't see themselves reflected in the context. It is important for material about formal volunteering to use images and stories of diverse volunteers and to 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.



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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.

If organisations continue to design volunteering around assumed norms of language, confidence and familiarity, they will continue to exclude those who could contribute most. However, when inclusion is built in from the start through culturally relevant communication, trusted relationships and flexible pathways then participation expands, trust deepens, and communities become more connected.