

TALKING TOGETHER



L–R: YPRL Community Program Officer Mahamed Hassan Awl, Himilo Community Connect Community Project Officer Amal Hussein, YPRL Community Program Officer Aisha Ahmed and Ivanhoe Branch Manager Ian Wedlock

Public libraries should be welcoming to everyone – but do we always succeed? Who doesn't feel welcome in our spaces – and why? These are the questions that **Kate Ferguson** and her team at Yarra Plenty Regional Library wanted to explore when they put forth the proposal for *Talking Together*, a project that aims to build trust with the local Somali Australian community in Melbourne's north.

Like many young people, young Somali Australians face social isolation and the resulting mental health struggles. However, cultural norms mean that they do not necessarily have the language or ability to talk about their problems with their parents or other adults in the community. This lack of support and inability to process is detrimental to their wellbeing. As places of connection that support social, mental and physical health, public libraries can play a key role in helping such communities.

The Somali Australian community in the West Heidelberg area of Melbourne's north is highly educated

and motivated but experiences lower rates of employment, in part due to lack of networks and social capital. They face discrimination and prejudice. Shockingly for us at Yarra Plenty Regional Library (YPRL), young Somali Australians in West Heidelberg indicated to their local government council, City of Banyule, that they did not trust the library or feel welcome in either of their local YPRL branches. They were largely unwilling to travel to either the Ivanhoe or Rosanna branch, even though they are only around three kilometres away from the neighbouring suburb of West Heidelberg. Branch staff also observed that people in this community did not visit the library. Some outreach had occurred before the pandemic hit, but the library had not been able to establish a trusting relationship.

During our extensive lockdowns in Melbourne in 2020, YPRL staff implemented a codesign approach to our programming, with staff participating in Introduction to Codesign training sessions and starting to look at a different way of engaging with our communities.

This approach was consolidated and strengthened in 2021 with six staff undertaking deep-dive training as codesign champions (with a further six undertaking the training in 2022). These champions worked closely with stakeholders from different communities – youth, First Nations and CALD communities – to listen, learn and codesign services and programs with them, starting from the question: 'How can we make the library more welcoming for these specific communities?'

These codesign frameworks have been central to YPRL's approach with the West Heidelberg Somali Australian community and the *Talking Together* project. We have recently recruited two community program officers, Mahamed Hassan Awl and Aisha Ahmed, and a project officer from the community, Amal Hussein, to lead the project, with an existing YPRL project officer to support them. Together we will enlist a group of young Somali Australians for a series of codesign workshops to determine what the community wants from its local library service. Based on that

community input, we will then design and run a series of Talking Together events to address and support mental health. These might be workshops or seminars or another format, and may include bringing in mental health professionals, business networks, speakers, creators or artists. The events will be delivered to the local area of West Heidelberg and will include a deliberate introduction to the library's staff and services.

The consultation group will also design and run a festival in early 2023 that will be a celebration of culture. This will again be codesigned by community, with an aim to hold the festival outside the Ivanhoe Library and Cultural Hub, forging cultural links. It could include music, food,

art, dancing and anything else the group identifies as being appropriate. After the first step of bringing the library to the community, we aim to bring the community to the library, where they will be able to see themselves reflected and feel welcome and supported.

In addition to this, we will seek input on our library collection from the local Somali Australian community – what would they like to see and read? – and we are also building staff capacity through cultural competency training. We're partnering with council, community groups and community health and education groups to build on existing relationships and work together to create something that allows the local Somali Australian community to thrive.

Although this project is still in its very early stages, we're already seeing strong results in building trust with the community. Himilo Community Connect, a local Somali Australian community group, has connected with the library on multiple levels. Their playgroup now visits our storytime sessions, with all the families becoming members of the library – and many have returned to visit for other reasons. An after-school club has connected with us and is participating in our school holiday

activities, while university students have joined a library study group for remote learners.

The reception to our initial overtures has been amazing. We've found that once we start to consciously invite people in and engage with their feedback, trust builds very quickly and they are very happy to walk in our doors. 🌟

KATE FERGUSON

Regional Partnerships and Programs Manager
Yarra Plenty Regional Library
kferguson@ypri.vic.gov.au

Once we start to consciously invite people in ... trust builds very quickly



The State Library of Victoria and Public Libraries Victoria have partnered with VicHealth to offer Victorian public libraries Innovation grants in the area of Health and Wellbeing. YPRL's Talking Together project was a grant recipient so that they could continue their work with the local Somali Australian community.



Mahamed and Aisha purchasing prayer mats locally to go in the prayer room at Ivanhoe Library and Cultural Hub