

KAREN COMMUNITY PROJECT

"We don't want to be the next Taskforce"

Summary Report

Community Safety and Cohesion | Early Intervention and Prevention | Access and Referral Pathways | Capacity Building and Governance

This summary brings together findings from community-led consultations across 14 Karen community, faith, youth, cultural, disability, aged care and service groups in Melbourne's West. It is tailored for government and service providers and focuses on community safety and cohesion, early intervention and prevention, access and referral pathways, bicultural and interpreter support, and community capacity building and governance. The Karen Community Project (KCP) has rebranded to Heeyersu to reflect the broader scope of the work the community is currently leading.

Acknowledgement: This work acknowledges support from the Department of Justice and Community Safety (DJCS), Scanlon Foundation, AMES Australia, Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY), and Wyndham Community and Education Centre (WCEC), alongside the contribution of Karen community leaders, young people, families, elders, carers and volunteers.

1. Executive summary

The consultation findings show that access to justice is directly connected to community safety, social cohesion, settlement, family wellbeing, youth engagement, disability, aged care, language access and trust in services. Across the 14 groups, participants described a community that is resilient and highly connected, but often left to navigate complex legal, social and government systems without adequate language support, bicultural guidance or coordinated referral pathways.

The strongest message is that community members are seeking early support before issues escalate. The community is not asking only for one-off information sessions; it is asking for a coordinated community-led response that strengthens safety, cohesion, access to services, referral pathways, bicultural support, community capacity building and shared governance. Heeyersu provides that next-step response.

2. Evidence base and methodology

Consultation scope	Methodology	Evidence generated
14 Karen community groups	Community-led focus groups and facilitated discussions conducted in culturally appropriate settings, with Karen and English language support where required.	Consistent themes across youth, families, elders, carers, disability and aged care participants, faith groups, cultural organisations and service-linked groups.
Lived experience and community voice	Participants shared experiences of legal, service, safety, family, settlement, employment, youth, disability, aged care and wellbeing issues.	Findings identify practical barriers, protective factors, service gaps, access pathways, community priorities and recommendations for action.

3. Overall report findings

- **Community safety and cohesion are shared priorities.** Participants raised concerns about youth safety, fear, misinformation, discrimination, isolation, family stress and lack of trusted places to seek help. Protective factors include faith networks, cultural identity, youth leadership, elders, family support and community solidarity.
- **Early intervention and prevention must happen before crisis.** Many people seek help late because they do not know where to go, fear judgement, or do not trust formal systems. Youth-focused engagement, mentoring, family support, cultural activities and safe spaces can prevent escalation into justice, crisis, homelessness, family breakdown or disengagement.

- **Access and referral pathways are unclear and fragmented.** Community members are often bounced between services, receive limited follow-up, or rely on informal leaders to navigate complex systems. Clear first points of contact, warm referrals, coordination and follow-up are needed.
- **Bicultural workers and qualified interpreters are essential.** Language barriers remain one of the strongest barriers to justice and service access. Participants identified the need for trained interpreters, bicultural workers and Karen-speaking representatives who understand legal language, cultural context and confidentiality.
- **Community expertise, lived experience, capacity building and governance must be recognised.** Community leaders, youth leaders, elders, churches, cultural groups and volunteers already act as first responders, translators, advocates and navigators. This expertise should be resourced through paid roles, training, supervision, governance structures and clear accountability back to the 14 groups.

4. What this means for government and service providers

The findings identify a practical implementation gap. Formal systems often expect community members to know where to go, what to ask for and how to follow up. In reality, many people first turn to trusted community leaders because these relationships are safer, culturally understood and easier to access. Government and services can achieve stronger outcomes by partnering with this existing community infrastructure, investing in capacity building and embedding community governance into program design, delivery and evaluation.

Issue identified	System risk if not addressed	Practical response needed
Language and service confusion	Delayed help-seeking, misunderstanding of rights and responsibilities, reliance on children or untrained family members to interpret.	Bicultural workers, qualified interpreters, plain language resources, supported referrals and culturally safe information.
Youth disengagement and safety concerns	Escalation into justice contact, family stress, community fear and reduced social cohesion.	Early intervention programs, mentoring, sport, arts, cultural connection, leadership and wellbeing support.
Fragmented pathways and limited follow-up	People fall through gaps or return to crisis because referrals do not translate into outcomes.	Community-based intake, triage, warm referral, case coordination and follow-up.
Community capacity and governance are under-resourced	Trusted leaders carry complex issues without training, funding, supervision, governance support or system recognition.	Fund community capacity building, lived experience leadership, governance structures, training and shared accountability loops.
Lack of culturally safe service engagement	Low trust in government and services, under-reporting of issues, late crisis presentations and limited prevention.	Outreach in trusted places, co-designed service models and ongoing feedback to the 14 groups.

5. Recommendations tailored for government and services

For government	For service providers
Fund a community-led safety and cohesion response that provides culturally safe first contact, prevention, youth engagement and follow-up.	Partner with the 14 groups and Heeyersu through shared planning, outreach, referrals and community feedback loops.
Invest in early intervention and prevention programs for young people and families before issues escalate into high-cost crisis and justice systems.	Deliver services in trusted community settings, including churches, community hubs, youth spaces, sporting programs and cultural activities.
Resource bicultural workers, interpreters and Karen-speaking navigators across justice, health, education, employment and social services.	Use qualified interpreters, plain language and translated materials; avoid relying on children or family members to interpret complex matters.
Formalise warm referral pathways between community groups, legal services, youth justice, family support, mental health, AOD, housing, employment and settlement services.	Provide clear guidance on where to go first, what to expect, confidentiality, eligibility, referral steps and follow-up responsibilities.

For government	For service providers
Recognise community expertise and lived experience through paid roles, training, capacity building, governance participation and evaluation roles.	Co-design programs with young people, elders, carers, families and people with lived experience, and include community representatives in governance and review processes.
Support data and case-study collection using de-identified information to strengthen evidence, advocacy and service improvement.	Share outcome data with community partners and use feedback to improve service access, safety and accountability.

Key message for decision-makers: community safety and cohesion require early, trusted, culturally safe responses - not only crisis intervention after harm has already occurred.

6. Heeyersu as the next-step response

The Karen Community Project (KCP) has rebranded to Heeyersu to reflect the broader scope of the work the community is currently leading. Heeyersu is already established and operating. It provides a practical Community Support Group (CSG) platform for intake, triage, warm referrals, community safety and cohesion activities, early intervention, youth engagement, bicultural access support, capacity building, governance and follow-up.

Heeyersu program / function	Role in meeting community need	Government / service value
Saturday Community Clinic	Culturally safe first point of contact for intake, triage, supported referral and follow-up.	Reduces confusion and prevents people being bounced between services.
Youth Reconnecting Program	Early intervention through mentoring, cultural identity, leadership, sport, arts, wellbeing and positive pathways.	Strengthens community safety, social cohesion and diversion from justice system contact.
Elders & Leaders Visitation Program	Cultural mentoring and support for young people in youth justice and correctional settings, including throughcare pathways.	Supports rehabilitation, reintegration, family connection and reduced reoffending risk.
Bicultural access and referral support	Karen-speaking workers and trained community navigators help people understand options, confidentiality and next steps.	Improves trust, quality of referrals and service uptake.
14-group governance and accountability loop	Community groups remain connected to governance, feedback, outreach, capacity building and ongoing evidence collection.	Keeps the response community-owned, culturally informed, transparent and accountable.

7. Implementation priorities and accountability

- **Confirm Heeyersu/CSG** as the shared community-led access and referral pathway for participating groups and partner services.
- **Fund coordination, bicultural workers, interpreters, program delivery, data collection, community capacity building and governance so the work can move beyond volunteer-only delivery.**
- **Establish referral agreements** with legal, youth, family, health, mental health, AOD, housing, employment and settlement services.
- **Deliver community safety and cohesion activities** through youth programs, family support, mentoring, outreach, legal information, cultural connection and prevention-focused education.
- **Track outcomes** including number of people supported, referrals made, referrals completed, youth engaged, education sessions delivered, follow-up outcomes, community feedback and de-identified case studies.
- **Report back to the 14 groups through a clear governance and accountability loop so community members can see how their voices are shaping action, funding priorities and service improvement.**

Proposed ask

Government and service partners are asked to resource Heeyersu/CSG, formerly developed through the Karen Community Project, as an already-established community-led platform that can strengthen community safety and cohesion, improve access and referral pathways, build community capacity, embed shared governance and prevent escalation into crisis.

Bottom line: The consultation evidence is consistent. The community does not need another disconnected consultation process. It needs investment in an existing community-led platform that can deliver prevention, supported referral, youth engagement, bicultural access, capacity building, governance and accountability back to the 14 groups.