Building inclusive communities

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS IN HERVEY BAY, SUNSHINE COAST AND TOWNSVILLE, QUEENSLAND

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Australian Human Rights Commission

adcq ANTI DISCRIMINATION COMMISSION QUEENSLAND

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1   Introduction

In June and October 2017, the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) and the Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland (ADCQ) held community conversations in Hervey Bay, Sunshine Coast and Townsville. These conversations were forums, which sought to support regional communities in strengthening inclusion and community cohesion.

There is evidence of growing racial intolerance and discrimination in Australia. The Scanlon Foundation's annual *Mapping Social Cohesion* report, for instance, found that in 2016, 20 per cent of Australians had experienced racial discrimination in the previous 12 months (a finding replicated in 2017). In recent times, there has also been substantial public debate about cultural diversity, immigration, and community cohesion.

It is important that regional Australia is part of conversations about racial tolerance and social cohesion. *Mapping Social Cohesion* surveys have found varying levels of racial and cultural intolerance across regional and urban areas in Australia.[1]

Human rights and anti-discrimination authorities have a critical role in empowering communities and advancing human rights. Both the AHRC and the ADCQ have a statutory function in promoting public understanding and acceptance of human rights.[2]

The community conversations were co-hosted by Australia's Race Discrimination Commissioner, Dr Tim Soutphommasane, and Queensland Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Kevin Cocks. They focused on cultural acceptance, community harmony, and rejecting racism. In total, an estimated 145 people took part in the process.

The conversations were an exercise in deliberative democracy. In a deliberative democracy, members of a community debate issues based on mutual respect and reason, seeking consensus where possible.[3]

Consistent with this approach, the facilitators used the 'World Café' method to guide the discussion. This method involves structured conversations in small groups that encourage contributions from everyone, and connect people with diverse perspectives.[4] It also encourages communities to devise their own solutions to the challenges they are dealing with. Conversation centred around two questions:

- What does it mean to belong in your community?
- How can we share the risk and responsibility to build a safe and inclusive community?

While in Hervey Bay, Sunshine Coast and Townsville, the Commissioners also took the opportunity to meet with local councils, businesses, community groups and non-government organisations to discuss building strong and inclusive communities.

Drawing upon the community conversations, this report identifies a number of strategies and actions that can be improve community cohesion. At a time when public debates can be the source of division and polarisation, it is important to support community efforts to build understanding and foster inclusion.

2   Hervey Bay

2.1   Hervey Bay at a glance

Hervey Bay is a city on the Fraser Coast of Queensland. It has a population of approximately 52,000 people. Hervey Bay has a substantial tourism industry and hosts a campus of the University of the Sunshine Coast. In the last five years, the Hervey Bay population has grown older and more diverse. The median age is now 10 years above the national average and the proportion of residents who were born in Australia or who had both parents born in Australia has decreased (though is still above the national average). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population has proportionately increased, so too have households who speak a language other than English (though this group is still well below the national average).

	2016 census	**2011 census**	**2016 – Australia**
Median Age	48	45	38
Aboriginal/TSI Population	4.0%	3.4%	2.8%
Both parents born in Australia	61.3%	67.4%	47.3%
Born in Australia	74.9%	78.0%	66.7%
Households where a non-English language is spoken	6.1%	5.8%	22.2%
Median weekly income (household)	$926	$779	$1,438

Source: ABS, Census 2011 and 2016, using Hervey Bay SA3 Level.

2.2   The conversation

The community conversation was held at Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre on 21 June 2017. It was organised in partnership with Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre, which had promoted the event through its mailing lists and local contacts. The Commissioners also had an informal discussion over dinner with the networks of the Hervey Bay community on the previous evening.

Approximately 40 residents participated in the conversation. In response to a question posed about why they came along, many expressed an interest in meeting people, learning more about human rights, and improving the community. One participant said they were "looking for a kinder, more cohesive local community". Another said they were "worried about our community growing very narrow minded".

What does it mean to belong in Hervey Bay?

The first question posed related to belonging in Hervey Bay. In small groups, participants shared their own stories of belonging in the community. Participants identified barriers to belonging as well as groups in the community they felt are not necessarily as included or integrated as others are. They then reported back to the larger group.

Hervey Bay community conversation

A number of key themes emerged. Some linked belonging to the opportunity, and responsibility, to contribute to the community, although difficulties in doing this were noted. There was a strong sense that people should be prepared to "go the extra mile". Getting to know neighbours, joining community groups and clubs and participating in community events were suggested actions people could take to improve their own sense of belonging. One participant agreed it was important to be an "active member" of the community, but noted "you can't be an active member … if the community is not aware that you exist." Some participants noted that making the effort to contribute requires a level of commitment to the area which takes time to develop: "…a sense of belonging is a process, it's a journey. It's not something that you're born with and that you feel instantly…".

There was also a discussion of belonging being grounded in a feeling of safety and security in the community. It was acknowledged that there is a low crime rate in Hervey Bay, but some members of the community felt that the community – and the country – is under threat. One person expressed "an exasperation of what the media do at times to foment discrimination". However, participants repeatedly recognised the general friendliness of the Hervey Bay community as a valuable asset.

Linked to discussions of safety and security were acknowledgments that belonging meant accepting the diversity of the community in a meaningful way. Many in Hervey Bay have actively chosen to live in the area rather than simply being born there. For this reason, Hervey Bay has become more diverse, but some participants felt it perhaps has not embraced change enough. It was noted that Hervey Bay is "still predominantly a Caucasian community so for other diverse cultures to come in … we try to include, but we possibly struggle in our own experiences around not experiencing that diversity for ourselves." The importance of inter-cultural communication and inclusive cultural events was raised.

How can we share the risk and responsibility to build a safe and inclusive Hervey Bay community?

Discussion of risks and responsibilities focussed on communication, inclusion and challenging the fear of the unknown. Personal and group vulnerabilities were identified as risks, with an emphasis on the community banding together to share the responsibility for community cohesion. Participants felt the community should create

better networks to ensure that people are able to share ideas and learn from one another.

One group proposed a multicultural 'alliance' that could meet regularly and have annual plans. Several groups referred to creating safe spaces where people can come together, "whether it's by food or by sport". One participant referred to creating "safe, constructive spaces, and opportunities for diverse people to dialogue and come together respectfully". Another flagged the challenge of simply "preaching to the converted" and the need to "engage with those people that are so opposed to the other, constructively".

With some Hervey Bay community members

There was some discussion of an incident that had happened recently. A local bookshop opened up its space to a group of Muslim women, who wished to talk to the community and take questions. Participants recognised the owner took a risk and was "vilified on social media for doing that", and the women involved "went underground". There was a need expressed to turn a situation such as this into "a constructive opportunity to work with hearts and minds going forward." This could happen both offline and online.

Another focus was on cultural inclusion. This does not simply extend to tolerance and acceptance, but active celebration and integration of diverse cultures, for example, through their food, story-telling and lifestyle. A number of initiatives already exist: the HBNC hosts World Hijab Day, English classes and 'Culture Caf'. However, many recognised there is a lot more that could be done in this space. Cultural events bring people together in an easy environment and open up spaces for sharing stories and ideas.

The community also emphasised identifying the shared goals and values of the community, so as to promote community cohesion and a common identity. "Promoting empathy" and "allowing real communication" were considered essential to this. The role of Council and the HBNC were also identified as important for bringing people together.

3   Sunshine Coast

3.1   Sunshine Coast at a glance

Sunshine Coast is an area of Queensland that stretches along approximately 60 kilometres of coastline. With a population of over 300,000, it includes the towns of Caloundra, Maroochydore, and Nambour, among others. It is a tourism centre, popular due to its natural beauty and national parks. Historically, it has supported timber and small-scale farming industries. Like Hervey Bay, the Sunshine Coast population has also recently grown more diverse. The region has a growing multicultural population with one in every five people born overseas. According to Sunshine Coast Council, those born overseas represent 156 countries, 45 faiths and 96 languages. The Council also notes that Sunshine Coast hosts approximately 3,000 international students, "with many students living in our region for a duration of 3-4 years".[5]

	2016 census	2011 census	2016 – Australia
Median Age	44	42	38
Aboriginal/TSI Population	1.9%	1.5%	2.8%
Both parents born in Australia	58.0%	62.5%	47.3%
Born in Australia	74.0%	75.3%	66.7%
Households where a non-English language is spoken	7.1%	6.1%	22.2%
Median weekly income (household)	$1,260	$1,010	$1,438

Source: ABS, Census 2011 and 2016, using Sunshine Coast, Qld SA4 Level.

3.2   The conversation

The community conversation was held at Maroochydore Surf Club on 22 June 2017. It was organised in partnership with Sunshine Coast Council, which had promoted the event through its mailing lists and local contacts. Prior to the conversation, the Commissioners spoke at a breakfast event with the Sunshine Coast Council executive at the council chambers in Nambour.

Approximately 75 residents participated in the conversation. In response to a question posed about why they came along, many expressed an interest in the topic of conversation and broader social justice issues, as well as having a desire to learn and connect with others. One participant said they were looking at "how to connect with community in all aspects of life". Another said they "came to get views on what human rights practically means on [Sunshine Coast] – what big issues need addressing".

What does it mean to belong in Sunshine Coast?

The first question posed related to belonging in Sunshine Coast. In small groups, participants shared their own stories of belonging in the community. Participants identified barriers to belonging as well as groups in the community they felt are not necessarily as included or integrated as others are. These views and ideas were then shared with all the participants.

Sunshine Coast community conversation

A number of key themes emerged. Some linked belonging to the ability to access opportunities to be involved in and participate in the community. Schools, sporting and social groups and neighbourhood connections were all identified as important avenues for community connection and participation. It was also noted that some people may choose not to participate and those decisions should be respected. There was a strong sense that people should be prepared to acknowledge and be accepting of difference. One participant agreed it was important that we should be "working together individually and as part of a community to create a place where everyone feels strong, supported, heard and equal". Some participants noted that making the effort to contribute requires a personal connection to a place. Participants also noted that developing this connection takes time and may be helped by learning the history of the place.

There was also a focus on belonging being grounded in a feeling of safety and security in the community, and the various environments within the community. It was acknowledged that the Sunshine Coast provides a beautiful environment for residents and visitors, with ample public spaces, events and a great outdoor lifestyle. Participants felt that "living in a beautiful environment" and having "fresh air, sunshine and health" all contributed to a sense of belonging.

One table talked about what "belonging means – how does the dominant culture make space for diversity (change)?". Many participants reflected on the general friendliness of people on the Sunshine Coast, with one recalling a recently arrived refugee child saying "I feel safe and everyone wants to be my friend!".

How can we share the risk and responsibility to build a safe and inclusive Sunshine Coast community?

Discussion of risks and responsibilities focussed on leadership, education and taking personal responsibility and action. Several participants noted the importance of businesses and the local Council in providing leadership around community inclusion, dispelling myths and raising awareness. It was observed that individuals and

community groups have a role to play in building an inclusive community. Suggestions about how this could occur ranged from simple actions such as "smile" to "share dinner between neighbours" and "have courage to stand by people and businesses feeling vilification and discrimination."

Commissioners with Kim Price (Sunshine Coast Council) and Scott Harrison (Surf Lifesaving)

Homelessness, terrorism and tension arising from cultural and religious differences were identified as risks. One person expressed that "certain cultural duties and obligations can be a risk to safety." Sharia Law and what role it plays in Australian society was a focus of several table discussions. Some participants expressed concern that "the Australian way of life" will change if we accept Sharia Law. There was a dispute amongst participants about the reality and seriousness of such a threat, with some questioning whether unnecessary fear was being spread resulting in community division.

It was suggested that work is needed to bridge the gap between younger and older generations within the community. Initiatives such as Men's Shed were proposed as an avenue by which this could occur either by working with schools or facilitating a mentoring/knowledge transfer style program between younger and older men.

Throughout the discussions there was a strong sense that inclusion can be achieved through learning, building capacity and working together. One participant stated if we "exclude people from the community, we will not have a strong community as they cannot utilise their individual strengths and ability to contribute". It was suggested that community organisations could learn from the groups they are trying to support and also provide opportunities for everyone to develop and use their strengths. The importance of awareness and knowing what information and services are available was also highlighted. One participant stated it was about "being aware and understanding the resources or groups that are out there to work together for the one purpose." Another flagged the challenge that there is "not necessarily a strong sense of community at large – but a community of communities. For example, some are more rural or semi-rural villages; some are more urban or suburban". This could possibly be overcome through another participant's suggestion of not only having physical communities but "knowledge communities" that could operate as a network.

4 Townsville

4.1 Townsville at a glance

Townsville is the largest city in north Queensland, with an estimated population of 180,000. Like many parts of Queensland, it has a strong tourism industry, but also supports a prominent metal-refining industry and the largest campus of James Cook University. In the last five years, the Townsville population's median age has remained relatively stable and sits just below the national average. The proportion of residents who were born in Australia or who had both parents born in Australia has decreased slightly, but still remains well above the national average. Townsville has a significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, which has proportionately increased in the last five years.

	2016 census	2011 census	2016 – Australia
Median Age	36	34	38
Aboriginal/TSI Population	7.9%	7.1%	2.8%
Both parents born in Australia	65.2%	71.8%	47.3%
Born in Australia	79.5%	81.4%	66.7%
Households where a non-English language is spoken	8.7%	8.5%	22.2%
Median weekly income (household)	$1362	$1295	$1,438

Source: ABS, Census 2011 and 2016, using Townsville SA4 Level.

4.2 The conversation

The community conversation was held at Tony Ireland Stadium, Condon, on 4 October 2017. It was organised in partnership with the Townsville office of the Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland, which had promoted the event through its mailing lists and local contacts. The Commissioners also met with local business owners at a Townsville Chamber of Commerce event, the Aboriginal Legal Service in Townsville, and multicultural residents following the Annual General Meeting of the Townsville Multicultural Support Group.

Approximately 30 local residents participated in the conversation.

What does it mean to belong in Townsville?

The first question put to the participants was related to belonging in Townsville. In small groups, participants shared their own stories of belonging in the Townsville community. Participants identified the characteristics of 'belonging' and 'community', and discussed issues around these concepts. They then reported back to the larger group.

Townsville community conversation

Some key themes emerged, including the need for knowledge and recognition of Townsville's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history; acknowledging the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's present day contribution to the community; understanding that some people belong more than others; approaching those who are discriminated against when seeking solutions to community disharmony; and establishing that all members of the community have a responsibility to create a sense of belonging. It was also noted that job security certainly has a part to play in one's sense of belonging.

There were also very positive discussions about Townsville being culturally diverse, welcoming and friendly, and recognised as a designated settlement city for refugees. Sport was identified as something that brought the community together, however, it was acknowledged that women's teams had not received the same attention as male teams. Participants spoke proudly of how there were noticeably more women in leadership roles, but also lamented the fact that there was still gap when it came to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD women in leadership roles.

With the prevalence and easy access to social media sites, participants raised concerns about the impact of negative media on the community. There was a sense that there is a lack of interest in reporting on positive stories, giving the impression that nothing positive happens in Townsville.

Linked to discussions of inclusion were acknowledgements that access forms part of the notion of belonging. Some minority groups did feel excluded from mainstream community activities, clubs or memberships. Issues were raised specifically with regard to access for those living with a disability, for example, being prevented from participating in sport. It was noted that discrimination is about more than just physical barriers. It includes barriers in attitudes.

Participants concluded that although change is rather slow in Townsville, there is much hope in the young community leaders coming through the ranks.

How can we share the risk and responsibility to build a safe and inclusive Townsville community?

Discussion of risks and responsibilities focused on government, individual and community responsibility and action.

Participants felt that governance, if coordinated and managed properly could address community issues through better funding and resource distribution. For example, youth unemployment and youth crime are directly linked to disadvantage. Addressing the disadvantage through relevant programs and funding would logically have an impact on unemployment and criminal behaviour. There was a sense that the embodiment of good governance included whole of government responsibility, a need for government (at all levels) to be on the same page as the community, to be effective through strategic coordination and to focus on outcomes rather than outputs. Outputs were linked to 'ticking all the boxes' but not necessarily promoting sustained and effective change.

Discussions about individual and community actions revolved around getting to know one's neighbours, self-reflection, taking personal responsibility, considering what Townsville can do as a community, and acknowledging the history of Townsville (including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and contribution) by recognising significant cultural areas.

The use of service clubs as a positive influence and to promote inclusion was raised. Participants felt that service clubs could reach out to groups that were isolated, help mitigate criminal behavior amongst youth and have a role to play in addressing unemployment in the community. Related to bringing communities together was the notion that social media should not be relied upon to do this job. In many instances social media excludes certain groups of people and often distorts the truth.

In discussions of safe and inclusive communities, participants noted the need for there to be a shared understanding of what this actually means. There was concern that action needs to replace talk and this would entail some risk taking. Also linked to taking action was the idea that information was key to ensuring resources are shared appropriately and effectively.

Under the topic of responsibility the participants expressed concern about finding safe spaces to talk about racism and other issues openly and honestly. There was a desire for minority groups and the broader community to be educated about racism and gain a better understanding of each other. In the area of employment, it was suggested that services directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders need to be employing people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

5 Strategies and actions for the future

The community conversations on belonging in Hervey Bay, Townsville and the Sunshine Coast highlighted the unique qualities and challenges of each community. It was clear that the concept of belonging can be different for each individual, and in each community depending on a variety of personal, environmental and community factors. However, from the conversations it was also clear that there are some consistent challenges faced by all communities in building social cohesion and a sense of belonging for all.

In each location, specific actions were identified for the community to continue driving social cohesion. The Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland will continue to support these communities to follow through with the identified actions. The Australian Human Rights Commission will also monitor the progress of anti-racism initiatives in these regional locations and offer guidance and support where appropriate.

Three major projects arising from the community conversations that ADCQ and AHRC will be involved with are:

Hervey Bay: working with the Hervey Bay Neighbourhood Centre to deliver education and community awareness raising activities around the Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act and Racial Discrimination Act; supporting the work of FSG in introducing cultural activities that are currently occurring on the Gold Coast including cultural conversations and migrant welcome dinners.

Sunshine Coast: facilitating a three-day participatory leadership workshop in partnership with University of the Sunshine Coast and Sunshine Coast Council. The purpose of the workshop is to bring together people from community, private sector and government to learn and practice participatory processes that can be applied to collaborative and creative problem solving of community issues.

Townsville: in partnership with the local community, running a further conversation with young people and relevant youth stakeholders about belonging with a view to empowering young people to participate and contribute to the social and economic life of the community.

Conversations in all locations revealed a number of more ongoing and general strategies that communities could take on. These are summarised below.

Building networks and alliances	- Build a network of organisations and individuals committed to building an inclusive and fair community - Explore the creation of local "multicultural alliances" to support members of newly arrived migrant communities - Strengthen informal networks and social connections (e.g. conversation and activity groups), in order to build trust and belonging

Role of local government	• Local Councils have a major role to play in building socially cohesive and inclusive communities • In the case of Sunshine Coast, it was noted that both the ADCQ and AHRC will continue to support the Council to implement their Multicultural Action plan in 2017-2019.
Contact and social trust	• Ensure cultural events are held regularly in local communities, aimed at building friendships and connections • Events should emphasise story-telling and narratives, and should be accessible for diverse groups, including older members of the community
Safe spaces and online resilience	• Provide support to members of marginalised groups who may experience discrimination, exclusion and isolation • Establish and/or strengthen 'online communities' of support, such as through social media platforms • Create and/or maintain spaces in community venues that welcome those identified as being at risk of discrimination, exclusion and isolation

The belonging conversations also provided the Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland and Australian Human Rights Commission with useful information about the level of community awareness of Queensland and federal anti-discrimination law, and the role of the Commissions. This information will be used to inform a broader community engagement and education program to continue raising awareness and complement the community driven social cohesion projects.

Appendix: Evaluation

Evaluation surveys were sent to participants approximately six weeks after the community conversations in Hervey Bay, Sunshine Coast and Townsville. These were anonymous online surveys asking general demographic questions as well as seeking feedback on the event itself and any actions arising from the community conversations.

In total, 35 people completed the voluntary survey (around one-quarter of those who attended the conversations).The vast majority of those identified themselves as residents of the relevant area. Many also indicated they represented or were involved in community groups.

Respondents generally showed positive feelings about the inclusiveness of their communities. Most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt they belonged in their community and that they and others are generally welcoming, inclusive and willing to help those in need.

Respondents were similarly optimistic about the impact of the community conversation on their sense of belonging and social cohesion, agreeing that it helped the community to be more inclusive and increased their sense of belonging. 60 per cent of respondents in Sunshine Coast, for instance, agreed or strongly agreed that the conversation had increased their acceptance or understanding of different views. 55 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that it increased their sense of belonging in their community. 79 per cent stated that following the event they would have conversations about belonging or human rights within their network. One attendee reported they planned to "bring this conversation into [their] workplace and home cultural environment."

A majority of respondents felt they had learnt something new about another culture, religion, person or group by attending the conversation. One respondent who came to the Townsville conversation reflected that they had "learned more about Indigenous peoples and their culture and values. It was refreshing to have these conversations as there isn't very much opportunity to do this."

If you would like a copy of the full Evaluation Report, please contact either ADCQ or AHRC.

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[1] People living outside of the capital cities have been more likely to show intolerance when surveyed on acceptance or rejection of immigration and cultural diversity. See Andrew Markus, *Mapping Social Cohesion National Report 2016* (2016) 57. Available:
http://scanlonfoundation.org.au/research_surveys/2016/

[2] *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986* (Cth), s 11 (1)(g); *Anti-Discrimination Act 1991* (Qld), s 235 (i).

[3] For an introduction to principles of deliberative democracy, see Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton University Press, 2009). See also the research collection of the New Democracy Foundation, available:
https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/research/research-papers (viewed 5 February 2018).

[4] See: NSW Department of Education, 'World Café method' (2016) At:
https://education.nsw.gov.au/futures-learning/learning-and-teaching/community-consultation-toolkit/world-cafe-method.

[5] Sunshine Coast Council, 'Cultural Diversity' (19 October 2017) At:
https://www.sunshinecoast.qld.gov.au/Living-and-Community/Community-Support/Multiculturalism-on-the-Sunshine-Coast/Cultural-Diversity.