

Settlement Council of Australia

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Migration Program
Department of Immigration and Border Protection
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SCOA submission on the Migration Program:

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection on the Migration Program for 2013-2014. SCOA represents over 80 agencies in the settlement sector, which comprise the majority of agencies involved in funded settlement programs including SGP, Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) and Complex Case Support (CCS). SCOA members are involved in providing settlement support to recently arrived migrants and people of refugee background across Australia.

Migration has been important to Australia's development as a nation, and ensuring the correct balance between the different programs and the supports offered to migrants is key to maximising the benefits for Australia. Investing in participation and fostering the productivity of the migration program has provided significant dividends for a wide range of communities within Australia. Migration is key for growing the nation and structured settlement supports are crucial in strengthening social cohesion in metropolitan and regional Australia. The specialist body of settlement knowledge, expertise and supports is also critical to the access and outcomes of government initiatives beyond settlement. These include but are not exclusive to employment, regional development and engagement of new arrivals with other Australian communities.

SCoA recommends continuing the work on the commonwealth draft Settlement Framework as it articulated a strong planning structure to support migration.

This submission will cover both visa numbers and support levels, elements of which may relate more closely to DSS as the machinery of government changes take effect. The submission covers the following key points:

- Support for an increase in the family migration program
- Settlement support for family members and temporary migrants
- Maintaining strong links between DIPB and DSS as machinery of government changes are implemented
- Concern about the impact of reintroduction of TPVs and the significant caseload of BVE holders

- Concern about the number of bridging visa holders without work rights and the impact of this on their own and the broader community
- Concern about visa pipelines and delays in visa processing
- Planning and research on impacts of migration program should include qualitative elements as well as quantitative

Increase the family migration program

SCOA supports a strong family migration program, as our members see daily the positive impact family reunion has for individuals, families and the community. As the related migration programs (skilled and humanitarian) continue to bring people to Australia it is natural to expect increases in demand for places under the family program. There are significant benefits in supporting family reunion, for all family members. It is recommended the assessment process of the fiscal impact of the family reunion program include qualitative impact measures to ensure the true benefit for Australia is taken into account. For example, parents may appear to be fiscally negative or neutral to the economy, but if their capacity to provide childcare for their grandchildren frees up their working aged children to participate to a greater extent in the job market.

Settlement support for family members and temporary migrants

Settlement support for family members and temporary migrants would pay dividends in increased participation and social inclusion. A cost recovery approach could be taken, with associated increases in visa fees to offset the costs of providing settlement support. Early intervention for temporary migrants, many of whom go on to become permanent residents, taking learnings from other support programs, could minimise some of the disadvantages migrants face in gaining employment and establishing their new lives in Australia. Skilled migrants are likely to have family members, spouses and children in particular, and it is unlikely to expect employers will be supportive of the whole family.

Maintaining links between DIBP and DSS

As the machinery of government changes are implemented and responsibility for providing settlement services and support for migrants and people of refugee background moves to DSS it will be important to maintain close links between the two departments. Clear and effective transmission of information on planning levels and cohort demographics remains essential for planning and efficient delivery of settlement services. It is hoped that the Settlement Framework would be of assistance in this regard.

Impact of reintroduction of TPVs

The settlement sector remains concerned about the potential reintroduction of TPVs. The previous granting of TPVs had a range of negative impacts on individuals and communities, including:

- Significant negative psychological impact from the ongoing uncertainty of protection, and the inability to reunite with close family members (spouses and children);
- Difficulty in providing services due to ineligibility for needed services and a highly mobile cohort;
- Ongoing concern and confusion in the broader community about the nature, conditions and demographics of the TPV cohort.

Similar issues are being experienced with the current cohort who have been granted Bridging Visas, with similar restrictions.

Concern about the number of bridging visa holders without work rights

There is a significant cohort of people in the community who are on bridging visas who do not have work rights. This has a substantial impact on the people involved, their communities and the broader community. People are effectively destitute, living off charities and families, unable to support themselves or contribute to the community. This has a wide range of impacts on an individual and community level, particularly in terms of the mental health of people on Bridging Visas and the strain on charities who are called on to provide welfare assistance.

Visa pipelines and processing times

Certain elements of the migration program and particular visa categories have significant waiting times, due to pipeline and processing pressures. These pipeline pressures are likely to worsen, as the focus on skilled migration visas has a flow on impact for the family component of the program. It may be worth exploring if there are ways of cutting down processing times as a method to reduce pressure.

In addition there are some visa categories, such as the carer visa, where waiting periods undermine the rationale of the visa.

Planning and research

Planning and research within and for the migration program needs to always include the quantitative and qualitative aspects of migration. While we acknowledge the importance of fiscal analysis in planning for future migration programs the importance of the social dividends of migration cannot be ignored. Statistics and financial analysis only ever capture a portion of the

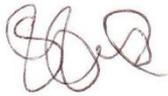
story, the harder to quantify benefits of migration to Australia are myriad, and need to be included in research, planning and analysis.

Analysing the immigration trends and links between the different components of the migration program would also be beneficial to gain a deeper understanding of the inter-relationships between the different programs, especially true of the connections between the family and skilled programs and the family and humanitarian programs.

SCOA remains committed to working with the Commonwealth to ensure the migration program achieves economic, cultural and social benefits for the whole of Australia.

Should you have any questions or require further information about any points raised in this submission please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sky de Jersey', with a stylized, cursive script.

Sky de Jersey
SCOA Executive Officer.