

The Impact of Coronavirus on Workforce Retention and Business Continuity for Settlement Services

Consultation Report

Introduction

In March and April 2020, the Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA) carried out a series of consultations with its members in order to gauge the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on settlement agencies and the communities they support, following the unprecedented measures taken by Federal and State governments in Australia to minimise the spread and subsequent impact of Coronavirus. This is the report of the second set of consultations held in April, which focused on workforce retention and business continuity for settlement agencies.

An online survey was developed for SCoA members, and was open for approximately two weeks. 37 responses were received from SCoA member organisations in every state and territory in Australia. A national teleconference was also held on Thursday 23rd April, with 41 people registering for the call. The aim of the teleconference was to enable us to “dig deeper” on issues raised in the survey. This report provides a summary of the feedback received through these consultations with our members.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The key findings arising from the consultations are:

1. Coronavirus is already having an impact on the settlement sector workforce, with 61.8% of respondents indicating that they would need to reduce staff working hours by between 10 and 50%.
2. To date, most organisations have managed to find ways to minimise this impact through a range of measures, such as redeploying staff.
3. The huge variety amongst settlement agencies in terms of their size, staffing, income and sources of funding means that a “one size fits all” approach to addressing these issues in the sector will not work. A more detailed and nuanced approach is needed.
4. There is considerable confusion surrounding government programs aimed at mitigating the Coronavirus crisis, and the usefulness of these programs for settlement agencies and their staff. More detailed information is needed to address this.
5. There is a strong need for ongoing monitoring and timely responses as this situation continues to unfold, by Governments in partnership with peak bodies and service providers.

The Impact on Workforce Retention and Business Continuity

In order to better understand the impact that Coronavirus - and the efforts to mitigate the virus - have had on settlement agencies, SCoA members were asked a number of questions about their organisation, including the services they deliver; their level of income; and the number of staff they employ. With these issues in mind, members were then asked questions relating to the impact this situation has had on their organisation, focusing on their ability to maintain the number of staff they employ, and the number of hours they are employed. Respondents were also asked about their uptake of Commonwealth government programs and initiatives aimed at mitigating the impact of Coronavirus. Their responses are outlined below.

1. Services Provided by Survey Respondents

Whilst all respondents provide settlement-related support services, the respondents also provide a wide range of additional services. These services include youth programs; aged care; family support; employment services; NDIS and other disability support; mental health; torture and trauma recovery; adult education; food banks; financial support; neighbourhood centres; community development; and sector development activities.

2. Annual Income

The survey respondents differ markedly in terms of their size and annual income, with some respondents having an annual income of less than \$50,000 a year, through to those with turnover of more than \$10 million per year. Interestingly, the responding organisations were fairly evenly spread across this range. This is important because it helps us to differentiate between the impact of Coronavirus on small, mid-sized and large organisations. Just over half of the respondents (52.9%) have an annual income of up to \$1 million, with the remaining 47.1% receiving income of over \$1 million. The table below provides a summary of the responses.

Income	Number of responses	Percentage
Less than \$50,000	3	8.8%
\$50,000 to \$100,000	8	23.5%
\$100,000 to \$500,000	3	8.8%
\$500,000 to \$1 million	4	11.8%
\$1 million to \$5 million	7	20.6%
\$5 million to \$10 million	3	8.8%
\$10 million plus	6	17.6
Total:	34	99.9%

3. Number of Employees

There was a similar diversity in the number of people employed by the organisations that took part in the survey. Just over a quarter of respondents (27.8%) have fewer than 10 employees; 38.9% of those who responded employ between 11 and 100 employees; and one third (33.3%) have over 100 employees. The table below provides further details on the number of people employed by the responding organisations.

Number of Employees	Number of responses	Percentage
Less than 10	10	27.8%
11-25	3	8.3%
26-50	5	13.9%
51-75	4	11.1%
76-11	2	5.6%
more than 100	12	33.3%
Total:	36	100%

4. Reduced Working Hours

When asked what percentage of their workforce were likely to have their hours reduced as a result of the impact of COVID-19, the answers were also varied. 38.2% of respondents indicated that fewer than 10% of their staff would have their hours reduced. The same proportion (38.2%) stated that between 10 and 25% of their staff would have hours reduced. Most alarmingly, 17.6% of respondents stated that between 35 and 50% of their staff would have their hours reduced. A total of 61.8% of respondents indicated that they would need to reduce staff working hours by between 10 and 50%. The table below provides a summary of the responses.

Percentage of Workforce Effected	Number of responses	Percentage
Less than 10%	13	38.2%
10-25%	13	38.2%
25-35%	2	5.9%
35-50%	6	17.6%
More than 50%	0	0%
Total:	34	99.9%

Additional light was shed on this issue during the teleconference. Most of the participants who discussed this suggested that the impact on staffing levels has been fairly minimal so far. Those from small and mid-sized organisations stated that, in most cases, staffing has not been reduced. This may reflect the nature of the funding for these organisations, which tend to be reliant on government grants. Given that grant funding is committed in advance, programs and organisations reliant on grant-based funding are unlikely to be negatively impacted in the short term. Comments included:

“Our front line workers haven’t had a huge impact. There’s no pressure to cut staff. We are getting everyone to work from home and ensuring systems in place. We’ve also changed the focus of programs and initiatives that target new arrivals – changing to online”

“It’s not had an impact on staffing. All staff are retained and continuing to work, working from home with a roster, rotating between the home and office. But our operations are limited because we are limiting face to face delivery. Clients are coming onboard online”.

Participants representing larger organisations explained that the situation is more complex for them. These organisations are often dependent on a range of funding types, including grants, fee-for-service, outcomes-based funding and donations. Organisations such as these are finding that some of their income has been directly impacted by Coronavirus, and this in turn is impacting on staffing. Comments included:

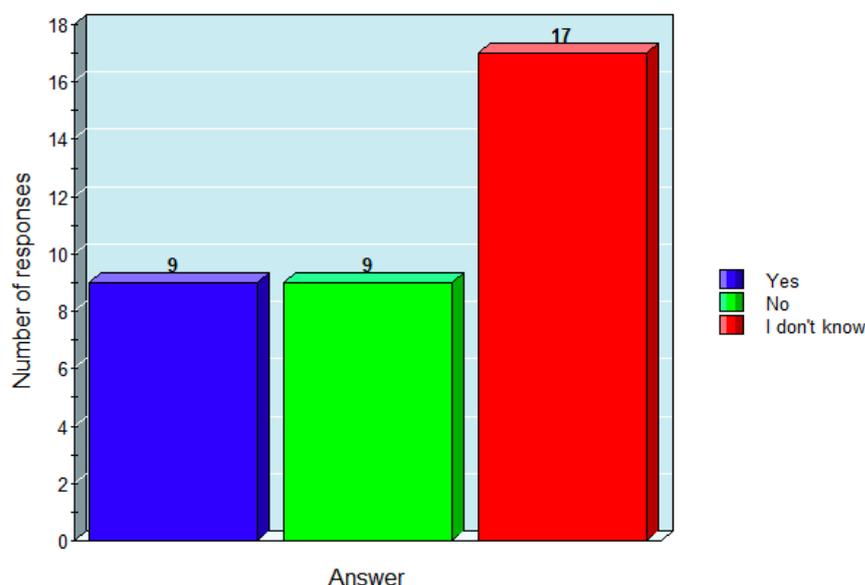
“It hasn’t taken affect yet. But with our community support program - we are having to look carefully at that because cases are being held up at embassy. Income streams that usually fund some of our work is likely to dry up very soon... so we are having to contemplate how to manage, particularly not knowing how long this will last for...”

Similarly, organisations that are funded partly or wholly through self-generated income such as donations and charity shops have seen a significant loss of income. Comments included:

“I had contact with a smaller community association who rely on their religious events to raise money. It has definitely been a big impact for them”

5. Uptake of Commonwealth Government Support

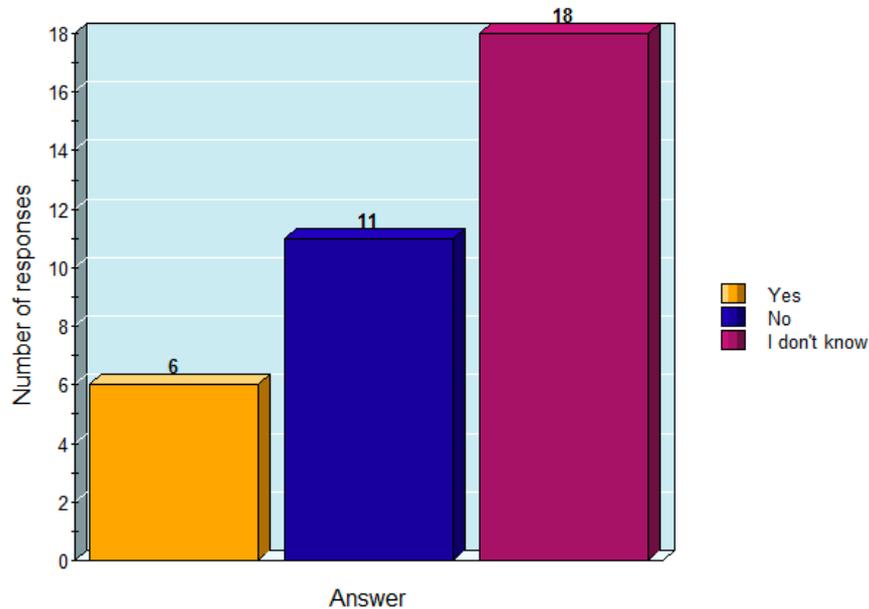
Respondents were asked whether they intend to take advantage of measures outlined in the Commonwealth Government’s economic response to Coronavirus, such as JobKeeper or boosting cashflow by up to \$100,000. Equal numbers of organisations responded “Yes” and “No” to this question, with just over one quarter (25.7%) choosing each of these answers. Interestingly, nearly half (48.6%) of respondents stated they don’t know, suggesting that there is still considerable confusion and uncertainty about these programs and their eligibility criteria. The graph below outlines the number of responses for each option.



It is relevant to note that following the conclusion of the consultations, the Federal Government announced changes to JobKeeper eligibility for charities and not-for-profits, including the ability to exclude government revenue from the JobKeeper turnover test. This likely increased the uptake of JobKeeper in settlement agencies, however the extent of the uptake in light of the changes remains unknown.

6. Sufficiency of Commonwealth Government Support

Respondents were even more negative when asked about the sufficiency of the government's programs in mitigating the impact of Coronavirus on their organisation. Only 17.1% stated that the government's initiatives would be sufficient, with 31.4% indicating that they would not be sufficient and 51.4% stating that they didn't know.



7. Other Measures Taken

A wide range of strategies were mentioned when asked what additional measures that organisations have taken to mitigate the effects of the crisis. These measures include:

- Staff working from home - some or all of the time
- Re-deploying staff where possible
- Reducing staff hours
- Providing services by telephone and online
- Encouraging self-care for staff and clients
- Cancelling events and gatherings where needed
- Freezing all new recruitment
- Minimising expenditure
- Diversifying service provision into new areas
- Updating Policies and Procedures, Business Continuity Plans, and Risk Management Plans
- Advocating with government departments and other funders regarding funding and reporting

Comments include:

“We have put in measures to continue providing services to clients, such as providing case work and counselling over the phone where possible. However, we still have face-to-face meetings with clients where necessary. We have moved our training programs on line and are working on different social media strategies, in particular for young people.”

“Remote functioning to reduce risk and spread of the virus. Additional infection control training, additional distribution of PPE to in-home workforce.”

“Approach funding bodies to modify outcome based funding arrangements where service delivery and revenue generation is impacted.”

“We've reduced staff hours, adapted programs as much as possible for phone/virtual delivery, advocating to funders for changes to funding requirements - eg where service / client-facing delivery is not possible, using staff time to evaluate previous programs or develop new resources for future use.”

“Small teams in the office, everyone working from home some of the time, welfare checks on clients with casual bi-lingual staff involved as well, phone support for casework, exploring set up of online activities.”

“Offering staff leave entitlements, flexible working options, moving across programs, changing service delivery arrangements to keep people employed and meet the needs of our cohorts.”

8. Other Issues and Concerns

a) Emergency Relief

One area of particular concern to participants on the teleconference was Emergency Relief Funds (ERF). Some participants are currently funded to provide ERF, through various state and Federal government programs. These organisations stated that there has been a marked increase in demand for ERF, including amongst client groups that would not typically seek such help. Comments included:

“There is significant demand because of Coronavirus from people who have lost employment or are waiting for Jobseeker or Jobkeeper assistance... for some, landlords are still not accepting the current situation”

“Many people are noticing that essential items have gone up in price. Other items that are regularly on special are no longer offered on special. This is adding more pressure”

In addition to services that are funded to provide ERF, agencies which are not funded to provide ERF also indicated that they have seen a significant increase in people seeking this type of support. Comments included:

“Because so many services have now closed their operations, those of us who are still open as an essential service are seeing a spike in clients for emergency relief or support from staff. There are lots of drop-ins happening for those of us who have their doors open”

b) Access to Online Services

The move to online service provision has highlighted issues of inequality for many clients of settlement services, due to issues such as lack of English language proficiency, and lack of access to - or familiarity with - online technology. Comments included:

“Staff might be receiving training in how to work online, but clients might not have the ability to do this”

“Parents who can't speak English are concerned about supervising their children at home. They are not being equipped with online learning materials and support”

c) Other Issues

When asked if they would like to provide any other comments, survey respondents mentioned a number of issues of concern. Their comments include:

“More assistance and support is needed, especially for the ones who lost their job”

“Humanitarian clients need increased supports in regional areas, as mainstream agencies lack awareness on how to work with these people. East Asian clients on student visas have accessed the service and are feeling vulnerable. There has been one physical assault (in our area) on a Korean female student.”

“There are no services for clients on bridging humanitarian visas. However, there is a big need.”

Casual staff who must isolate (eg: aged services support worker) are disadvantaged as they are unpaid. For example, a client has 'flu like symptoms, so the carer must isolate until client is tested. Carer does not get paid. Casual settlement workers (eg: homework centres) are similarly disadvantaged as their work has ceased, and we have no JobSeeker eligibility.

There is a need for coordinated supports to avoid any confusion for refugees and migrants who are finding it difficult to navigate the supports available.

It is very difficult to provide a human service when human interaction is limited. Pivoting an entire body of work that has taken 15 years to establish is no mean feat.

Coronavirus, and the efforts to minimise it, is having an impact on settlement agencies, and their ability to retain their workforce and ensure business continuity. Whilst to date the impact has been fairly well managed, SCoA's consultations with our member organisations show that there is a high degree of uncertainty about the future, as well as confusion about the availability and usefulness of Commonwealth Government programs aimed to mitigate this impact. It is vital that service providers, peak bodies and Government continue to work closely together to ensure that our vital settlement services, and their skilled workforce, are maintained. This will enable us to continue meeting the needs of Australia's multicultural communities.

Settlement Council of Australia
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