

Concept Note

Settlement Sector and Workforce Sustainability

This concept note has been prepared by the SETSCoP Secretariat and is based on feedback from the Settlement Sector and Workforce Sustainability Group. The note outlines the approach to supporting the settlement sector and workforce sustainability moving forward.

Background

SETSCoP is a national collaboration of settlement service providers across Australia, who assist vulnerable migrants and refugees under the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program. SETSCoP is facilitated by [Migration Council Australia \(MCA\)](#) to encourage the sharing best practice and expertise for effective settlement, in addition to collectively identifying issues and opportunities.

Since its establishment in January 2020, SETSCoP has developed sub-groups focused on key areas for settlement which include economic participation, operational, thematic, community capacity building and state-based best practice.

The SETSCoP CEO Forum was convened to address high level issues and strategic considerations as a result of the impact of COVID-19 on settlement services and to discuss the future of settlement service delivery. Two steering groups have been established to focus on identified areas of focus including enhancing the settlement sector and workforce sustainability, and mapping the social and economic impact of settlement.

Context

Migration and settlement have been instrumental to multicultural Australia. Despite disruptions to the Australian migration program due to COVID-19, Australia still saw 13,171 refugee resettlement visas granted in 2019-20.¹ Australia's total permanent migration program intake for 2019-20 was 140,366 places.²

COVID-19 has impacted the sector as settlement organisations face uncertainty and need to evolve. The impact of COVID-19 on Australia's migration and settlement programs creates an imperative to reimagine the settlement process and review service delivery models. It also provides an opportunity to focus on sector development and enhance workforce capability while prioritising areas of greatest needs, many of which are consequences of the pandemic such as employment and economic participation.

Strengthening capability and efficiencies of the sector and moving towards more person-centred, flexible and digitally based systems, will lead to better outcomes for settlement clients and enhanced social cohesion outcomes more broadly. Increased capability would

¹ <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/australia-offshore-humanitarian-program-2019-20.pdf>

² <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/report-migration-program-2019-20.pdf>

lend weight to an argument for the expansion of the SETS program and the opening up of the eligibility.

A focus on the professionalisation of the settlement sector workforce, will strengthen competency-based practice, ethics and conduct, scope of practice, and evidence-based methodologies. Standardising skills and competencies across the settlement workforce—and a greater focus on learning and development in settlement—will also enhance program deliverables.

The CEO Forum has acknowledged a need to better articulate and further strengthen workforce capabilities and workforce sustainability, and as such a related steering group has been developed. The following paper proposes four themes for settlement sector and workforce sustainability to be progressed through the SETSCoP, its related CEO Forum and driven by its relevant CEO steering group.

Developing the capability of the settlement sector to pivot to employment

Employment is a key priority area for settlement³ and leads to better social and economic participation outcomes for people from migrant and refugee communities.⁴ The economic downturn resulting from COVID-19 has significantly impacted the Australian labour market and has led to many job losses. Newly arrived migrants and refugees have been impacted, as many work in industries most affected by the pandemic. Settlement clients require comprehensive and tailored employment support, affording them with the best opportunity to secure stable and long-term employment.

There are opportunities for the sector to pivot and specialise in employment, to provide tailored and culturally-appropriate employment services and related supports to their clients, in view of New Employment Services Model to be implemented in 2022. A greater focus on upskilling settlement professionals in employment and enhancing the capacity of settlement organisations to provide client-centric and holistic employment support, will lead to better economic participation among those newly settled in Australia.

This could be developed through enhancing both whole-of-organisation and frontline staff capability and skills to effectively design and deliver employment and economic participation programs. A systems approach could include the development of appropriate resources and training, to effectively upskill and enhance specialist knowledge for the sector.

Professionalising and enhancing specialist skill sets of the settlement workforce

The settlement workforce has a long history of supporting people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and their communities. Settlement professionals demonstrate significant settlement experience and possess a broad range of skills, including cultural competency, bi-lingual and bi-cultural capability, some clinical, social and interpersonal skills. However,

³ <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settlement-services-subsite/files/the-national-settlement-framework.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-publications/reviews-and-inquiries/inquiries/review-integration-employment-settlement-outcomes-refugees-humanitarian-entrants>

there is no shared understanding of what best practice and evidence-based settlement practitioner competencies look like. With no competency standards for case management or community-based skills shared across sector, there is great variation in settlement practice and outcomes.

Defining effective settlement based on the National Settlement Services Outcome Standards (NSSOS) and Australian Government's National Settlement Framework will provide a basis for this work. Initially, developing a comprehensive and consistent narrative around the current specialist skill sets of the settlement sector by mapping workforce competencies and skills is required. A settlement competency standards framework and a settlement service provider accreditation framework will enhance standardisation, consistency and quality of services across the settlement sector in Australia. A focus on augmenting organisational- and individual-level competencies will facilitate greater learning and development and will enhance program deliverables and client outcomes. This in addition to the national sharing of knowledge, best practice and professional development opportunities through SETSCoP, could assist to promote a culture of continued improvement and development among settlement professionals. Establishing practice standards for the workforce in addition to service standards would also be consistent with good practice in health and social services.

Enhancing digital engagement and use of technology in settlement service delivery

Settlement organisations have historically relied on face to face and paper based settlement service delivery. The COVID-19 public health restrictions and lockdown have highlighted the need and benefits of digital service delivery, with many service providers now successfully engaging their clients through digital platforms.

There is an opportunity to fast-track and embed digital engagement in settlement service provision. The digitalisation of settlement services will promote greater flexibility and more client-centred engagement and autonomy, which may enable providers to meet settlement milestones more efficiently. Capacity building initiatives should focus on supporting the settlement sector to enhance systems and processes through digitalisation and improved technology capability in the settlement workforce and for clients.

Despite the value and efficiencies that the digitalisation of settlement could provide, there does need to be consideration on how best to support vulnerable migrants and refugees who struggle with digital literacy or have other access barriers to technology, ensuring that they are receiving sufficient support and are not further disadvantaged.

Greater digital engagement and use of technology in service delivery could be addressed through providing settlement organisations with digital service delivery platforms and by enhancing sector knowledge and learning around digital engagement through appropriate training and resources for organisations and their settlement staff, to enhance digital literacy skills of the sector and for settlement clients.

Strengthening organisational governance and strategic capability across the sector

Organisational size and complexity varies across the settlement sector, with some settlement organisations benefiting from support to develop governance and organisational capabilities. For smaller settlement organisations, there may be benefit in creating a Business Services Hub to support organisational governance. This would minimise the administrative burden on smaller organisations enabling a greater focus on client outcomes. Such an approach could also enhance the image of the sector.

Strengthening organisational governance and strategic capability will support settlement organisations to continue to develop, diversify and grow. Establishing a shared understanding and minimum good practice standards around governance for capability and sustainability is critical to the continued improvement of settlement services in Australia and, in turn, successful settlement outcomes for clients. It will also assist in forming a case for increased funding.

This could be addressed by capacity building initiatives, national high-level sector meetings and sector wide training to target strategic capability and business continuity. Further, the formation of a services hub would likely be of benefit.