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SUBMISSION ON THE

Department of Home Affairs  
Commonwealth Coordinator-  
General for Migrant Services  
Discussion Paper

*Next steps to improve Australia's  
settlement and integration of refugees*

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## Our Purpose

To support and partner with people of refugee and migrant backgrounds, providing connections that enable successful participation in a more inclusive Australia

## Our Vision

A profoundly diverse and inclusive Australia, a place where extraordinary diversity enhances the lives of all

For over forty years Spectrum has supported thousands of refugees to navigate life in a new culture and prosper. Our services include support for refugees and their families, employment, family and parenting, youth work, english language programs, casework, social groups and aged and disability services

[www.spectrumvic.org.au](http://www.spectrumvic.org.au)

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**Spectrum welcomes the opportunity to build on the learning and outcomes of the Shergold Review to further develop and improve the settlement experience in Australia. We firmly believe that to take the next steps to improve Australia's settlement and integration of refugees, future planning must be based on five key pillars.**

### Re-affirm settlement as a key nation building program driven by national and international leadership

For decades the Australia migration and refugee settlement program was heralded as nation-building. It shaped the richly diverse and prosperous country we are today. Spectrum believes that to take the next step we must re-affirm that notion and re-establish Australia's position of leadership in delivering humanitarian support to the world's displaced and at-risk refugees. Now is the time to re-frame the narrative around refugees and their contribution to our multicultural society, by forging new partnerships between government, community and the settlement sector to co-design systems to realise the social and economic potential.

### Mobilise social capital for a more inclusive and cohesive Australia

Social cohesion is a key driver of Australia's success as a prosperous, diverse society. According to the Scanlon Foundation *Social Cohesion Index*, more than ever before, Australians endorse the proposition that *'immigrants are generally good for Australia's economy'* and that *'Multiculturalism has been good for Australia'*. To take the next steps, settlement services must be positioned as key to mobilising untapped social capital, building relationships with and coordinating links to the wider Australian community and integrating programs with refugee sponsorship initiatives for better outcomes.

### Deliver economic inclusion through collective impact

Reflecting the aspirations of refugees, we fully support introducing employment support earlier in the settlement journey. However, our research also affirms that the Australian employment eco-system has many blind spots and presents multiple barriers for refugees aspiring for economic inclusion. Successful economic inclusion for refugees is best delivered through localised place-based economic inclusion action plans that bring together the key players in that eco-system, in particular settlement services.

### Impact through flexible, strengths driven and needs based program design that is underpinned by data and evidence

No two refugee settlement journeys are the same. There is no stereotypical refugee. The next steps must embed principles of client-centric service design based on strengths, needs and when required (not determined by artificial parameters or time constraints e.g. 5 years). We strongly encourage utilising data and metrics to make informed decisions about progress and outcomes, as well as data / reporting systems which are designed to incorporate the aims and resources of the settlement sector.

### Sustainable social infrastructure supported by professional practice standards and governance

As the Discussion Paper highlights, settlement services intersect with many (and most) parts of our social infrastructure – housing, health, mental health, family violence, child protection, employment and more. Settlement services must be recognised as an integral part of that social infrastructure, underpinned by a sustainable funding model that recognises the importance of investing in professional practice standards and governance and creating a sustainable workforce.

In developing this response to the discussion paper, Spectrum engaged widely with refugees, community members, staff and partner organisations. We strongly believe that a human centred approach to co-designing services and systems leads to better outcomes.

Recognising the content of those submissions, and foregrounding the contribution of service users, we would like to add the following about the current service system:

## Harness pre-arrival opportunities

*"So it was our Conversational English Online for youth. We started the program in lockdown in response to client concerns that they had little to no opportunity to practice their English in the community, so their English-speaking skills were going backwards. The program was well attended by youth clients from the North and West [Melbourne]. Clients would invite friends to join, sharing the link with them. One of my Iraqi clients (male) shared the link with his best friend (also male) who was still living in Iraq, but keen to practice his English. His friend joined us on a number of occasions from his living room in Iraq. The young people in Australia were able to tell him about life in Australia and to show him the view from their windows, and the client in Iraq was able to tell us about what was happening over there in regard to COVID, etc. Because of the time difference, the young man in Iraq was waking early, especially to join us."*

Spectrum Settlement Youth Worker

Some refugees spend long periods waiting for their visa to be processed before they travel to Australia. The experience of COVID19 and the development of online platforms have shown that we could do more to support people to prepare for their move to Australia.

We could provide opportunities to improve English language and practice communications, connect people with peers living in Australia and so increase knowledge about Australian society and customs and begin to introduce information on legal systems, employment, education, health, etc.

A common theme raised by settlement staff and sponsors is the importance of managing pre-arrival expectations and helping people anticipate the journey of settlement and reality of life in Australia:

*"Clients also often comment that they expected to receive a job soon after arrival and that they had no idea how difficult it would be to crack into the jobs market."*

Service users talked about how the lack of English and knowledge about Australia increased isolation and the risk of exploitation. In response, we could develop additional, in-language multimedia resources around pre-arrival. Many new arrivals are aged under 25 and there is a great opportunity for connecting with young people through online platforms. We support funding pilot projects which could develop effective resources and approaches in this area.

**Recommendation: invest in pre-arrival creating opportunities for people to improve English language and practice communications, connect people with peers living in Australia. This could increase knowledge about Australian society and customs and begin to introduce information on legal systems, employment, education, health, etc.**

**We support funding pilot projects which could develop effective resources and approaches in this area.**

*Having arrived in Australia with very limited English, I found that it took about one and a half years of AMEP classes to have the level needed for employment. Once in a job and socialising with mainstream people, I really picked up the language. Before that I was speaking in a 'school way'. In my family, my parents learned English very slowly, but my younger sister learned faster and finished high school and went to university. This meant our roles were reversed because of our different English levels. I think classes before arrival is a good way to prepare people for life in Australia. If you can't work, you don't have enough money to have a good life.*

Spectrum sees great potential from a social cohesion perspective in innovation that combines the strengths of the formal settlement infrastructure with the mobilisation of social capital emerging from refugee sponsorship initiatives

Support provided by settlement services and community groups is often viewed as distinct and separate (even if complementary). We believe that we are missing an opportunity - there could be huge benefits in supporting the development of partnerships and increasing joint working between services and community groups.

The arrival of refugees from Afghanistan in 2021 created an opportunity for Spectrum to develop new partnerships with community members. We linked with some local faith communities who were very keen to support the new arrivals. The immediate need was huge, working together we were able to respond quickly, in particular providing material aid such as furniture, clothes and baby equipment. The scale of the task meant relationships were built quickly and we are now exploring how community members can be more involved in ongoing support as families build their lives in Australia, as well as welcoming new arrivals in the coming years.

Spectrum HSP Manager

Spectrum is actively exploring a partnership with CRSA (Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia), including developing bilingual support groups from established refugee / migrant communities.

Spectrum's clients receive huge benefit from volunteers, and we receive positive feedback from them about how they value the opportunity to make a difference to the wider community. They contribute in multiple ways - supporting conversation classes, employment mentoring, travel training and more.

Our volunteers come from the wider Australian community and also former service users who want to support Spectrum and share the benefits of their knowledge with new arrivals.

*"I recently had a young man (an Afghan evacuee) at a youth program, who arrived late last year (Client A). He was chatting with me about his goals here in Australia and how he worried that attending Uni was now out of reach for him. He currently learns English and is becoming familiar with navigating Australian systems. He was quite down during this conversation, in which I tried to encourage him and build his confidence. With his permission, I invited another client to join the conversation - a young Iraqi man, who has been in Australia for 5 years (Client B). Client B listened to Client A's fears before telling him about his own experiences of coming to Australia 5 years earlier and learning English and to navigate systems. He was able to explain how out of reach things had also felt for him, but how he was now studying at university and working in a professional job, and the steps that it took for him to get there. This was an incredible conversation to observe. The young men were able to connect in a way that I couldn't have with the upset client. At the end of the conversation, the young men agreed to go to the gym together the next day and to talk more."*

Spectrum Settlement Youth Worker

**Recommendation: settlement service design includes investment in social capital capability so that settlement services and community partners can work together to provide holistic support to newly arrived families.**

Employment is a high priority for refugees and more can be done to provide effective, tailored supports to help people connect with a sustainable job and link employment readiness to English acquisition

As noted in our principles, successful economic inclusion for refugees is best delivered through localised place-based economic inclusion action plans that bring together the key players in that eco-system, in particular settlement services. Even new arrivals with extensive experience and skills in demand industries may experience significant barriers to sustainable employment. There are many employers willing to help if they have the opportunity to work in partnership with settlement services.

**Case Study: Spectrum – Aurecon Pilot**

In 2021, Spectrum developed a pilot partnership with multinational engineering firm Aurecon Australasia Pty Ltd to connect refugees with engineering and professional skills backgrounds with job opportunities in Australia.

The highlight of the pilot is the partnership and trusted mutual learning between the two organisations. Both are committed to creating a culturally safe recruitment and employment experience. This has included: creating innovative recruitment practices aimed at reducing structural disadvantage, designing a more inclusive approach to the interview process, co-creating professional employment readiness resources to support candidates and providing ongoing wraparound supports from wider settlement services.

The project is also supported by an engineering industry panel of volunteer mentors and an EAL specialist who provide regular ongoing mentoring to participants after they start work. It has been an excellent example of business, settlement services and community supporters working together. While the early stages of the pilot have been resource intensive, over time the rewards will increase.

The first roles Civil Engineer Technician and Marketing and Communications Consultant commenced in April 2022 and recruitment is currently underway for the next roles.

The Shergold Review clearly highlighted that we need to develop innovative responses to support new arrivals into work, that talent and resources are wasted when we do not facilitate this:

*"It's very hard when you come to Australia and no-one know you and people ask, 'Did you finish high school'. When people see you are a refugee, they think you don't know anything, but you are a university graduate. Cosmetic work was like a hobby for me, but it didn't allow me to fully use my qualifications and experience."*

ICT Graduate with experience of 8+ years in skilled roles, supported by Spectrum

**We need to ensure that people are given the supports they need – both to secure a job and then maintain it:**

*"The interviews [how they work] were something I had no idea about in Australia, so I failed them. If I'd found out earlier, I wouldn't have had to wait for such a long time. Not using my skills and experience was very sad for me every single day."*

Spectrum Service User  
(now in full time employment)

*"Working with clients, we have learned that to provide effective support you have to consider all the things about Australian practice and custom that might be new. You should not make assumptions about existing knowledge and skills. For example, learning how to write and correctly format an email is an important skill for the Australian workplace and enables successful communication. However, people may not have been exposed to this in previous workplaces or had the opportunity to practice it with support. Digital literacy is essential for everybody and highlights the need for equitable access to resources and individualised training opportunities."*

Spectrum Settlement Worker

It is important to acknowledge that there are different pathways to employment and social connection. We encourage more use of volunteer and work experience placements as a way of building skills and knowledge, supporting people to prepare for employment so it is sustainable in the long term:

*"When I fled Syria and came to Australia as a refugee, I never thought I would have the opportunity to ever work again, especially in a country where my qualifications/work experience may not be recognised. This really affected me because I felt like everything I have built, worked hard for and achieved had all gone to waste. Spectrum lifted my spirits again and helped me feel as though there was hope. The support you provided to me may not feel like a big deal to you, but it was life changing to me. When you wrote my resume you included every single detail about me, which made me feel as though everything I have ever achieved was being acknowledged and some what valued to you. You then trained me on how to conduct a job interview, which is a completely difference process to what I am used to in my country. When I applied to be a volunteer at Spectrum, I didn't expect to be considered for employment because being a refugee, you become used to being the last person in the line, you become used to refusals and neglect. I don't have family and I don't have friends in Australia, but because of your support I have Spectrum and I am home."*

Spectrum Migration Team Member



**Case Study: Spectrum Job Accelerator Program**

Spectrum's Employment Language Support (Job Accelerator) Pilot Program was developed to provide job opportunities for vulnerable migrants and refugees who were still engaged with the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) or learning English in a community setting. It was designed as a strengths-based approach to support participants to:

- overcome barriers to entry-levels jobs in the health and community services industries
- introduce people to the workforce earlier in their settlement journey than is often the case
- provide industry-orientated, job focused language support

For the Pilot we worked with the **Multicultural Home Support Services** (MHSS). We wanted to establish a successful, ongoing pathway for refugees not only into MHSS roles but also into other aged care and disability providers. MHSS has service contracts (to provide staff) to over fifty social care organisations and cannot currently meet all the requests for staff it receives. The ongoing need to recruit support staff provides an opportunity to connect new Australians with paid employment. Supports offered to the participants included:

- Vocational English language support targeted to the specific employment opportunities
- Group sessions to practice English and participate in a peer network
- Access to self-paced learning
- Peer mentorship (a 'buddy'), work experience/shadow shifts and pre and post-placement support
- Support to engage in a Certificate III in Individual Support for participants seeking to take on the personal care/support worker roles. An objective of this pilot is to establish an ongoing pathway for SETS-clients into employment at Spectrum and in other industries

*Recommendation: invest in creating opportunities to support flexible pathways to sustainable employment. Recognise settlement services are an essential part of the ecosystem, when resourced they can harness the good will of business and community members as well as ensuring clients receive a holistic, wraparound service.*

**Build flexibility and responsiveness into settlement services, offer a range of services which enable people to make connections, learn about living in Australia and provide avenues for additional support**

**Refugees arrive in Australia from many different places and with different experiences. As a result, their immediate and long-term needs can be hugely varied.**

Services need to be flexible in individual support, but also offer a range of opportunities for clients to opt in to connect with issues which are of concern to them. There of course needs to be support to access essential services such as health, housing, and childcare. There are also opportunities to build resilience and support settlement through accessible groups on parenting, family relationships, driving lessons, workplace culture and volunteering.

More than this, settlement services need to be recognised as part of the essential service system. The COVID19 pandemic taught us many things. One was the disruption caused to the sector when the borders were closed and the subsequent reduction in revenue for the Humanitarian Support Program – many settlement services lost skilled, experienced staff as a result. It was not a sustainable approach to maintaining a workforce that needs to be highly skilled.

At Spectrum we see firsthand the difficulties members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities experience in navigating access to mainstream services. During COVID19 the negative health, social and economic impacts were disproportionately felt. Mainstream services need to do better to meet the needs of refugees, and settlement services will play an essential role in providing these connections.

*Recommendation: Settlement services are recognised as an essential part of Australia's social infrastructure and require sustainable funding, workforce investment and governance standards to support and strengthen the sector.*

**Parenting in a New Culture**  
Spectrum developed the **PINC** program in the early 2000s and has delivered it to hundreds of parents. It is a series of practical sessions and guides specifically designed for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, to help them support their children through the experience of settling in a new country. Parents also contributed to the ongoing updating and co-design of new materials.

Our bilingual and bicultural parenting support staff work hand-in-hand with parents to strengthen and reframe their role in the family, with an aim to improve parenting skills and confidence, and to create stronger relationships between parents and children.

Since COVID19 it is possible to engage in the program in person and online. We adapt the program and provide additional activities as needed, for instance PINC for Arabic or Farsi speakers, PINC For Fathers, a PINC Fathers' Playgroup / swimming lessons and day trips to connect families to wider Melbourne (the Zoo, picnics, cinema).

The SETS Women's Safety funding has enabled Spectrum's INC (training, research and development) Team to recently develop Families in a New Culture resources, meeting a longstanding request from clients for a group to explore aspects of partner and intergenerational relationships in an Australian context.



