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Findings of the Review of the Community Support Program

Led by the Commonwealth Coordinator-General for Migrant Services,
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Introduction

The Government announced a commitment to undertake a review of the Community Support Program (CSP) in late 2019 in response to an independent Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants, *Investing in Refugees, Investing in Australia* (hereafter the Shergold Review).

The Shergold Review noted that while the establishment of the CSP was well-intentioned and welcomed, stakeholders held considerable concerns about program costs, which made it harder to engage the broader community in settlement efforts. The Shergold Review team also heard concerns about places within the CSP coming from within, rather than being additional to, the overall refugee and humanitarian intake. The Shergold Review report recommended that the Commonwealth Government introduce a place-based community sponsored visa which would harness the collective strength of whole communities partnering with local governments, service providers and community organisations.

The CSP Review was led by the Commonwealth Coordinator-General for Migrant Services from July 2020 to March 2021. The purpose of this document is to provide a high-level summary of the key findings of the CSP Review.

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Methodology

The CSP Review considered the Government's strategic objectives for the program. The Government's intention was that the CSP would provide a sustainable model of private sponsorship for refugees that minimised costs to government and complement, rather than compete with, the existing Refugee and Special Humanitarian Program categories of the Humanitarian Program.

The CSP was designed to:

- allow communities and businesses, as well as families and individuals, to propose and support humanitarian visa applicants with employment prospects; and
- harness community support for refugees, including the willingness of the Australian business community to support refugees in practical ways through employment and financial assistance.

The CSP Review was informed by the following:

- A series of roundtable meetings convened by the Commonwealth Coordinator-General for Migrant Services and the Refugee and Migrant Services Advisory Council (RAMSAC) with targeted stakeholders, including Approved Proposing Organisations (APOs), settlement service providers, faith-based groups, community organisations, peak bodies, business groups, refugee-led organisations and NGOs. Roundtable discussions were held in August 2020.
- A desktop evaluation of reports, submissions to Government, reviews, advocacy campaigns, and articles on the CSP from a range of stakeholders, quarterly reporting and monitoring reports, and an historic workshop between the Department of Home Affairs and APOs.
- Discussions with CSP entrants and CSP supporters conducted in July and August 2020.
- Engagement with international partners in the UK, Ireland, Canada and the UNHCR as well as a close comparison of international community sponsorship models.

A complete list of stakeholders can be found in the Appendix.

Key Findings

Introduction

The CSP Review heard that the program has provided a valuable alternative pathway for a cohort of humanitarian entrants. CSP entrants have had strong self-reported employment outcomes when compared with other humanitarian entrants. The program has also seen strong engagement from existing refugee communities in Australia. However, the CSP Review also highlighted a number of obstacles to greater engagement and growth in the program. This has prevented the CSP from fully realising its original objectives.

Entrants' settlement and integration outcomes are generally positive

Self-reported data provided by APOs indicate that CSP entrants were meeting the expected settlement outcomes¹ and achieving stronger rates of employment compared to entrants under other streams of the Humanitarian Program.

Self-reported data indicate strong rates of employment among primary entrants, with the majority of entrants employed by the end of their first three months in Australia. Strong early employment outcomes, however, do not necessarily translate to ongoing employment, with APOs reporting that many entrants changed jobs (at times for employment better suited to their skills) and others became unemployed. APOs have also reported that entrants may have stopped working in order to seek further training or education, or more recently, for COVID-19 related reasons.

The above-average employment outcomes are difficult to attribute to any one factor and may be due to a range of reasons, including:

- the pre-arrival screening
- the self-reported nature of the data
- the Assurance of Support (AoS) (meaning any uptake of working age payments must be repaid)
- support provided through community networks and the APOs.

The CSP does not offer places in addition to the Humanitarian Program

The CSP Review heard criticism from many stakeholders that places for the Program are drawn from within the base Humanitarian Program. Stakeholders argued that the inclusion of CSP places in the overall quota mean that the CSP does not act as a true complementary pathway.

¹ The outcomes of CSP entrants are measured against a raft of outcomes areas including housing, language, community participation, education and training and employment, which are based on the Humanitarian Settlement Program Outcomes Framework against which all other humanitarian entrant outcomes are measured.

Community organisations generally report being unwilling to engage in (and bear high financial costs for) sponsorship without it generating places in addition to the current humanitarian intake. It was suggested that Australians more generally would be more motivated to donate time and money if they saw their efforts contributing to an increase in the overall number of refugees settled. There was also a strong sense that a lack of ‘additionality’ contributed to slow uptake by businesses.

Stakeholders agreed that the sponsorship model offers increased benefits to entrants, based on international evidence. Given this, some players saw additionality as something that could be pursued as a longer-term goal, and were supportive of a new or reformed, low cost program in the short-term, which could lay the groundwork for additionality to be applied in future.

Stakeholders were most concerned about the high costs of the program

Stakeholders were critical of the costs associated with the CSP, with high fees and charges viewed as the most significant barrier to access for the program and a brake on program growth.

The current program mandates a Visa Application Charge (VAC) of \$19,399, additional fees of \$2,680 for secondary applicants, APO fees (which can be up to \$15,000 and include an additional refundable bond of \$5,000) and costs borne through the AoS mechanism,² as well as airfares, medical screening and settlement costs. For a family of five these costs can total up to \$100,000.

While stakeholders unanimously accepted the need for community supporters to contribute financial as well as in-kind support, the strong preference was for funds to be channelled into direct settlement and integration support for refugees, rather than the payment of a VAC. Many agreed that costs covered by supporters should focus primarily on travel costs, initial start-up costs and an AoS to repay any working age payments the entrants may claim in their initial 12 months, complemented by in-kind support to help entrants to settle, including through building social capital.

To increase affordability, and thereby enhance sponsor group appetite and program growth, stakeholders called for the removal of the VAC and the fees charged by APOs.

Demand is high for an un-linked pathway, but the CSP is primarily used for family reunion

Stakeholders have raised ongoing concerns that the CSP has become predominantly a family reunion pathway given the ongoing high demand for family reunion through the long-established Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) and the fact that only families are sufficiently motivated to meet the high costs. The CSP is seen as a high cost alternative to the SHP, providing perceived faster processing and greater certainty of outcome.

Many stakeholders want the CSP to remain an avenue for family reunion, but also want to open up opportunities to support UNHCR-referred refugees or un-linked humanitarian entrants (those

² Under the Assurance of Support mechanism, an Australian supporter (known as an assurer) guarantees that they will repay any working age social security payments received by the entrant within their first year. All CSP applicants (including children) must be covered by an AoS in order for the visa application to progress.

without existing links to Australia). Stakeholders generally believe that the Government should provide an opportunity for willing groups in the wider community to act as sponsors for those without links to Australia and contribute to alleviating global resettlement needs.

Current demand for the CSP comes from a small number of key diaspora communities (including families) whose members can afford the costs of the program. As such, this has contributed to a high proportion of new arrivals settling in cities such as Melbourne and Sydney, limiting the capacity of the CSP to facilitate regional resettlement.

The CSP is not harnessing broader community goodwill and support

The CSP was intended to attract Australian community organisations, charities and businesses, in addition to individuals and families, to engage in the program and provide financial contributions and wraparound settlement support to humanitarian entrants. Broader evidence demonstrates that social connections are important drivers of social cohesion. Stakeholder feedback indicated that sponsorship programs should provide an avenue for members of the broader Australian community to engage with and make a meaningful contribution to the resettlement and integration of refugees. Internationally, governments are focused on ensuring that their integration programs are providing meaningful avenues for engagement.

The CSP Review found that, in practice, the high costs and other policy settings (see discussion of 'additionality' above on page 3) have meant the program is unable to harness broader community support for humanitarian entrants outside of existing diaspora communities and businesses. APOs have also not necessarily been well-placed or resourced to build community engagement with the program.

Stakeholders reported that the CSP design does not capitalise on the settlement and integration benefits that broader community engagement can provide, including the building of social capital, as seen in the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees program. Canada's longstanding, successful program harnesses the collective strength and goodwill of community-based volunteers, employers and settlement services, with close connections with local and state governments and civil society, to provide wraparound support to welcome refugees.

There is a groundswell of community support to participate in a community refugee sponsorship program which allows greater engagement

The CSP Review found that there is a strong cohort of Australians across the country who are ready and willing to support refugees to settle into their communities. However, the Review also found that there is no existing framework – within the CSP or via other avenues – for everyday Australians to connect with and help newly-arrived refugees. For a range of reasons, volunteering through existing services or programs is difficult. Current systems often do not encourage or facilitate refugees to build organic relationships with locals in their communities.

Numerous community groups, local councils, community leaders and local Australians have voiced their support for reforms of the approach to community sponsorship to allow greater community

engagement. Groups across Australia are seeking an opportunity to demonstrate their willingness and capacity to play a more practical role in helping refugees to settle in Australia.

APOs are more involved in preparation than post-arrival support

Stakeholders raised concerns that the APOs appear to spend a majority of their efforts on the preparation and visa processing aspects of the program. This includes arranging mandatory settlement services to be purchased from HSP providers on a fee-for-service basis, as required in the Deeds of Agreement with the Department of Home Affairs. Aside from visa support and outcomes monitoring, APOs were reported to have a small supervisory role over settlement, with entrants and supporters more likely to seek support from their diaspora communities than APOs.

Refugee groups raised concerns about the high fees charged by APOs to supporters and entrants under the CSP, with APOs charging up to \$15,000 per application. Stakeholders noted that, rather than APOs charging participants fees, supporters and entrants should be able to draw on other resources, such as a partnership comprised of volunteers, employers and settlement services.

Narrow selection criteria contributes to the program being undersubscribed

Stakeholders criticised the additional employment-related selection criteria applied to CSP applicants, which require applicants to have a job offer pre-arrival (or be 'job ready'), be within 18-50 years of age, and have adequate English. Stakeholders argued that these criteria limited the CSP's uptake and further growth, and urged for the removal of the additional selection criteria.

Based on evidence from the Canadian model, strong integration outcomes can be delivered through post-arrival program settings without the need for screening of pre-arrival characteristics.

Measuring 'job readiness' and English language aptitude through the CSP application process was found to be subjective and difficult to apply robustly or consistently. As well, lengthy visa processing timeframes (which can be more than 12 months) made job matching prior to arrival difficult. Many Australian businesses and representatives reported reluctance to offer employment opportunities prior to arrival but have signalled strong readiness to engage once entrants are in Australia, particularly if costs to do so are lower.

Refugee-led groups reported that the 'job ready' requirement, combined with the costs of the CSP, meant that women were less likely to qualify as applicants or supporters, given lower earning capacities, caring responsibilities and often limited access to education and work in countries of origin or asylum.

There is limited participation from businesses

Stakeholders noted it is much easier and cheaper for businesses to invest in and support refugees who are already in Australia, rather than pay significant fees to sponsor refugees who are not guaranteed to be accepted and may take one to two years to arrive.

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The high costs mean that the CSP is an unrealistic option for all but the most invested and committed businesses. Many employers are not well equipped or provided with support to take responsibility for wraparound settlement and integration support and may also need to factor in additional payments to settlement service providers to provide this support.

Appendix

Stakeholders Consulted

- AMES Australia
- Amnesty International Australia
- Armidale Sanctuary Humanitarian Settlement
- Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network
- Assyrian Australian Association
- Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce
- Australian Local Government Association
- Australian National Committee on Refugee Women
- Australian Migrant Resource Centre
- Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations
- Australian Red Cross Society
- Australian Refugee Association
- Business Council of Australia
- Brotherhood of St Laurence
- Canberra Baptist Church
- CareerSeekers
- Coffs Harbour Refugee Sanctuary
- Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative
- CSP entrants and supporters
- Diversitat
- Eastern Christian Welfare Australia
- Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia
- Forcibly Displaced People's Network
- Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma
- Global Refugee-led Network
- Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative
- International Commission of Jurists Australian chapter
- Illawarra Multicultural Services
- International Organization for Migration
- Jesuit Refugee Services
- Micah Australia
- Migration Council of Australia

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- Mountains Anglican Refugee Network
- Multicultural Australia
- Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network
- National Council Churches in Australia
- National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group
- RAMSAC
- Refugee Communities Association of Australia
- Refugee Communities' Advocacy Network
- Refugee Council of Australia
- Refugee Education Special Interest Group
- Refugee Legal
- Refugee Talent
- Representatives of the Canadian, UK and Irish governments
- Rural Australians for Refugees
- Settlement Council of Australia
- Settlement Services International
- Spectrum Migrant Resources Centre
- South Gippsland Rural Australians for Refugees
- TAFE Directors Australia
- Talent Beyond Boundaries
- Thrive Refugee Enterprise
- UNHCR Global Youth Advisory Council
- Universities Australia
- Uniting Church in Australia Assembly
- United Nations Refugee Agency Australia
- Welcoming Australia

Note: State and territory governments were briefed on the progress of the CSP Review in 2020 through the Senior Officials Settlement Outcomes Group.