

2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission

January 2025



Introduction

About SSI

Settlement Services International (SSI) is a large not-for-profit organisation dedicated to creating a more inclusive society in which everyone can meaningfully contribute to social, cultural, civic and economic life.

SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic (CALD) backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas.

In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services, and in 2019 opened in Victoria providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. In 2023-24, SSI supported more than 60,000 people across almost 60 programs nationally. In addition to supporting individuals and communities through the services we provide, SSI seeks to influence the systems, laws and policies that result in inequities and limit opportunities. SSI is an impact-focused organisation, whose Impact Strategy sets out our goals for an equitable, resilient, enriched, and inclusive Australia where our clients fully participate in the economic, social, civic, and cultural life.

About SSI's submission

SSI welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the 2025-26 Australian Government Pre-Budget process. In this submission, SSI puts forward five proposals for reforms and new areas of investment over the forward estimates. Our proposals align with the Australian Government's policy priorities and commitments to:

- implement Activate Australia's Skills' solutions to tackle waiting lists, skills shortages and the cost-of-living drawing on Australia's overseas-trained workforce;
- establish a national advisory body for children from multicultural backgrounds;
- optimise people with disabilities' access and use of foundational supports and the National Disability Insurance Scheme;
- embed dedicated domestic and family violence prevention initiatives across Australian Government settlement programs; and
- enable, develop and improve the community sector's sustainability and impact.

The 2025-26 Budget presents an opportunity to leverage and strengthen Australia's multicultural nation, and bolster social cohesion, as highlighted by the Multicultural Framework Review. SSI's five Budget proposals, summarised in the table below and detailed in the following pages, all advance that Review's core principles of connection, identity, belonging and inclusion:

Proposal	Description	Page
1. Implement Activate Australia's Skills' solutions to tackle waiting lists, skills shortages and the cost-of-living drawing on Australia's overseas-trained workforce	Solution 1 - Skills Recognition Ombudsman: One national governance system for all overseas skills and qualifications recognition, including an Ombudsman with regulatory power to provide independent oversight and transparency. Solution 2 - Skills Recognition Grants: Financial support to individuals, removing cost barriers that hold them back from going through the skills and qualifications recognition process. Solution 3 - National skills recognition portal: National online portal (a one-stop-shop) that provides clear, integrated information on how to get skills and qualifications recognised across states/territories and professions, with referrals to services to provide appropriate support.	4

	Solution 4 - Migrant Employment Pathways Hubs: Place-based, integrated employment hubs with wrap-around employment support, broad eligibility, and recognition navigators to provide tailored advice on getting overseas skills and qualifications recognised.	
2. Establish a national advisory body for children from multicultural backgrounds	The body would advise on systemic reforms needed to support the developmental, safety and wellbeing of culturally diverse children in Australia.	7
3. Improve accessibility, navigation and engagement for all people with disability	Pilot and evaluate a Navigators Model to optimise people with disabilities' access and use of foundational supports and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) to improve accessibility, navigation and engagement for all people with disability.	9
4. Embed dedicated domestic and family violence prevention initiatives across Australian Government settlement programs	Reinvest and embed dedicated prevention initiatives across critical settlement programs funded by the Department of Home Affairs to address domestic and family violence among refugee and migrant women in early settlement.	12
5. Enable, develop and improve the community sector's sustainability and impact	Strengthen the not-for-profit sector through a staged implementation of the actions put forward in the <i>National Not-For-Profit Sector Blueprint</i> ¹	15

In addition, SSI's budget proposals outlined above complement and intersect with those put forward by several peak bodies including ACOSS, FECCA and the Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA).

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¹ Blueprint Expert Reference Group. (2024). *Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint*. Retrieved from <https://www.dss.gov.au/panels-and-other-groups/resource/not-profit-sector-development-blueprint#:~:text=The%20NFP%20Blueprint%20will%20enable,led%20and%20purpose%2Ddriven%20sector>

Proposal 1: Implement Activate Australia’s Skills’ solutions to tackle waiting lists, skills shortages and the cost-of-living drawing on Australia’s overseas-trained workforce

Proposal Description

The Activate Australia’s Skills’ campaign’s 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission outlines four costed proposals to tackle waiting lists, skills shortages and the cost-of-living by getting more overseas qualified workers already in Australia to work in their professions again. The Australian Government should:

- fund and implement a Skills Recognition Ombudsman;
- fund and implement Skills Recognition Grants;
- fund and implement a National Skills Recognition Portal; and
- fund and implement Migrant Employment Pathways Hubs.

The four solutions are not isolated – they are part of a holistic proposal to reform Australia’s bureaucratic and expensive system for recognising overseas skills and qualifications.

Activate Australia’s Skills is an alliance of 90+ organisations, convened by SSI, to reduce barriers so people already in Australia with overseas qualifications can work at their full potential. Please refer to [Activate Australia’s Skill’s 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission](#) to access the full details of each solution’s impact, cost breakdown and implementation considerations.

Solution	Description	Funding
1. Skills Recognition Ombudsman	One national governance system for all overseas skills and qualifications recognition, including an Ombudsman with regulatory power to provide independent oversight and transparency.	\$14.6m over 4 years
2. Skills Recognition Grants	Financial support to individuals, removing cost barriers that hold them back from going through the overseas skills and qualifications recognition process.	\$14m over 4 years
3. National skills recognition portal	National online portal (a one-stop-shop) that provides clear, integrated information on how to get skills and qualifications recognised in certain states/territories and professions, with referrals to services to provide appropriate support.	\$3.8m over 4 years
4. Migrant Employment Pathways Hubs	Place-based, integrated employment hubs with wrap-around employment support, broad eligibility, and recognition navigators to provide tailored advice on getting overseas skills and qualifications recognised.	\$8m *per hub* over 4 years
		Total: \$40.4m over 4 years + additional Hubs

Delivery timeframes

2025-26 and ongoing over the forward estimates.

Rationale and impact

“I thought it would be easy to find a job in Australia, but it wasn’t. I had degrees in computer science from Iran and Japan, but I had to apply for more than 1,000 jobs in Australia before I eventually got an IT role. I worked as a labourer while I tried to find work in my field.”² IT Specialist from Afghanistan who now works for Accenture in Adelaide as an Application Development Analyst

The cost of living is rising, waiting lists for essential services are getting longer, productivity has flatlined and businesses can’t find the workers they need.³ The solution: activate Australia’s overseas-trained workforce to boost the supply of much-needed skills.

Right now, almost half (44%) of qualified permanent migrants in Australia are unable to work in their fields. This equates to around 620,000 people who are working below their level of skill and qualification – while we have critical worker shortages.⁴ Of this group, 3 out of 5 (60%) arrived through the skilled migration stream.⁵ Waiting lists and costs are getting worse due to this problem and businesses and communities are feeling the pain. According to Deloitte Access Economics, **\$9 billion could be added to Australia’s economy each year if permanent migrants living in Australia worked in jobs that matched their skills at the same rate as Australian-born workers.**⁶

Most discussion of migration as a response to labour and skills shortages focusses on policies to increase the number and assessment of migrants coming into the country. This is a lost opportunity as many migrants and refugees who are already here are under-employed or working in positions well below their skill and qualification level (even if they are in paid work).⁷

Australia’s bureaucratic and expensive system for recognising overseas skills and qualifications must change. For too long, successive governments have tinkered with the system, creating sporadic add-ons and exceptions for certain industries or professions, when system-wide reform is needed.

The Activate Australia’s Skills’ campaign’s 2025-26 Pre-Budget Submission outlines four costed proposals to tackle skills shortages by getting more overseas qualified workers already in Australia, to work in their professions again. By implementing these reforms, the Government can fill skills shortages, lift productivity, improve access to services and help overseas-trained workers achieve their full economic potential.

Policy alignment

Solution 1: Skills Recognition Ombudsman

The proposal for one national governance system and Skills Recognition Ombudsman aligns strongly with the recommendations of the 2024 *Migration, Pathway to Nation Building* Inquiry.⁸ In its final report, the Joint Standing Committee on Migration recommended that, “the Government should undertake more fundamental

² SSI. (2023a). *Billion Dollar Benefit: A roadmap for unleashing the economic potential of refugees and migrants*. Retrieved from https://www.billiondollarbenefit.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Billion_Dollar_Benefit_Report-1.pdf

³ Jiang, L., & Nguyen, T. (2024). *Skilled & ready: A blueprint for activating Australia’s overseas-trained workforce*. Retrieved from https://activateaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Activate-Australia-Skills_Blueprint-for-Reform_Oct-2024_WEB-1.pdf

⁴ Deloitte Access Economics. (2024). *Billion Dollar Benefit: The economic impact of unlocking the skills potential of migrants in Australia*. Retrieved from https://www.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/DAE_SSI_Skills_Mismatch_Report_19062024_WEB.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Joint Standing Committee on Migration. (2024). *Migration, Pathway to Nation Building*. Retrieved from <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportjnt/Migration,PathwaytoNationBuilding.pdf>

steps to improve the integrity, consistency, fairness, and timeliness of skills assessment processes”. More specifically, it recommended that the Australian Government create an independent appeals mechanism for skills assessment decisions (recommendation 36) and take the lead in a nationally-coordinated approach to harmonising the regulation of skills assessment, qualification recognition, and occupational licensing requirements across the nation (recommendation 37). The Settlement Council of Australia’s Policy Platform also calls for this solution.⁹

Solution 2: Skills Recognition Grants

In line with the Government’s commitment to make services and opportunities more accessible, this solution would reduce cost barriers that hold back many overseas-trained workers from getting their skills and qualifications recognised. It would also help achieve the objective of employment services reform (including the Select Committee on Workforce Australia’s *Rebuilding the employment services system* led by Julian Hill MP) to connect people with the full range of social and economic opportunities, regardless of who they are, where they come from, or where they live.

Solution 3: National Skills Recognition Portal

The Joint Standing Committee on Migration’s 2024 *Migration, Pathway to Nation Building* Inquiry recommended establishing an online portal as a one-stop-shop for navigating skills and qualifications recognition and occupational licensing requirements, available in multiple languages.¹⁰

Related to this, the Committee saw merit in SSI’s suggestion that a consolidated and fit-for-purpose online tool could be developed to improve skills and qualifications assessment and recognition processes. This could be modelled on ‘Recognition in Germany’, which is available in multiple languages. Such an online ‘one-stop-shop’ could be developed as part of a wider effort by the Commonwealth and the state and territory governments to harmonise skills assessments, qualifications recognition and occupational licensing requirements, to ensure a seamless process across all levels of government.

The Commonwealth’s [Your Career](#) website, which houses career information for those embarking their career can act as existing infrastructure that could be leveraged to feature skills and qualification recognition processes.

Solution 4: Migrant Employment Pathways Hubs

Migrant Employment Pathways Hubs aligns strongly with the recommendations of the 2023 Inquiry into the employment services system led by Julian Hill MP,¹¹ including the need to recognise that people have different pathways to economic participation and that specialist services are needed for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The 2024 *Migration, Pathway to Nation Building* Inquiry also recommended the Australian Government implement “a pilot program to better aid refugees in navigating the skills assessment and qualification recognition processes in Australia” (recommendation 46) and that a system be established “through which refugees are more directly connected to job opportunities relevant to their skills and qualifications” (recommendation 48).¹² Migrant Employment Pathway Hubs would deliver this, but with a broader mandate to not only support refugees but also the 620,000 permanent migrants in Australia who are working below their level of skill and qualification.

⁹ Settlement Council of Australia. (2024). *Settlement Policy Platform*. Retrieved from <https://scoa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/SCOA-Policy-Platform-Nov24-Final.pdf>

¹⁰ Joint Standing Committee on Migration (2024). Op. cit.

¹¹ House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services. (2023). *Rebuilding Employment Services: Final Report on Workforce Australia Employment Services*. Retrieved from https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/RB000017/toc_pdf/RebuildingEmploymentServices.pdf

¹² Joint Standing Committee on Migration (2024). Op. cit.

Proposal 2: Establish a national advisory body for children from multicultural backgrounds

Proposal Description

The Australian Government should establish a national advisory body for children from multicultural backgrounds, ideally reporting into a dedicated national children's governance structure. This body's remit would be to advise on systemic reforms needed to support the development, safety and wellbeing of culturally diverse children in Australia.

Delivery timeframes

2025-26 ongoing over the forward estimates.

Rationale and impact

Supporting children's development, safety and wellbeing is essential to safeguarding Australia's future. Australia is a wealthy country, but we are not advanced when it comes to children's safety and wellbeing. For example, Australia ranks a low 32 out of 38 OECD countries on child wellbeing.¹³

Australia, as a signatory to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is required to uphold children's rights to protection and participation irrespective of their abilities, any other status or family background and uphold the right to grow within and practice their cultural, linguistic and religious traditions.¹⁴ The Convention further stipulates that for children unable to live with their birth family, they must be provided with alternative care that is continuous and respects the child's culture, language and religion.¹⁵

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in Australia, experience a range of challenges to their development, safety and wellbeing and exercise of the rights set out in the Convention. At the same time, Australia is now more diverse – ethnically, linguistically, culturally – than ever before and this demographic reality is reflected most acutely among children. Just over a quarter of children enrolled in first year of full-time school in 2021 were from multicultural backgrounds, up from 17 % in 2009.¹⁶

"The local classmates of my children are not interactive with them, I think because of the language barrier and maybe because of our appearance.... Locals don't like to interact with Naheed because of her looks, dress and language."¹⁷ Refugee Parent

¹³ Hollonds, A. (2024, December 10). *After the social media ban, is the job done on child safety and wellbeing?* Retrieved from <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/opinions/after-social-media-ban-job-done-child-safety-and-wellbeing#:~:text=When%20the%20backslapping%20over%20the,safety%20and%20wellbeing%20in%20Australia>

¹⁴ UNICEF United Kingdom. (2019). *A summary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNCRC_summary-1_1.pdf

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lam, B., McMahon, T., Beauchamp, T., Badu, E., & Brinkman, S. (2024). *Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II: Exploring trends to promote the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia*. Occasional Paper - Number 5. SSI/Education Futures UniSA. Retrieved from https://www.refugeehealthnetworkqld.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/smaller-versionStronger_Start_II_1_ONLINE_10042024-min-1.pdf

¹⁷ Amina, F., Barnes, M., & Saito, E. (2024). Language and belonging in Australian schools: perspectives and experiences of families from refugee backgrounds, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28:13, 3193-3213.

Understanding the challenges facing children from CALD backgrounds is hampered by the fact that the research is not keeping pace with Australia's increasing diversity. This lag arguably includes child and family policy and practice,¹⁸ creating a gap the Australian Government can address by bolstering inclusion and innovation to improve outcomes for culturally diverse children. There are also gaps in data collection to underpin policy and program responses for multicultural communities including children.¹⁹ For example, current reporting mechanisms are unable to determine the number of children from CALD backgrounds who are living in out-of-home care (OOHC) in Australia.²⁰

A national multicultural children's body, ideally reporting into a dedicated national children's governance structure, could advise the Australian Government on the distinct developmental, safety and wellbeing needs of children from culturally diverse backgrounds in Australia and contribute to systemic changes to allow them to thrive.

Policy alignment

Coordinating policy for children is currently widely spread across different portfolios, leading to calls for the appointment of a Cabinet-level Minister for children to position the rights and wellbeing of children at the centre of government decisions that affect them,²¹ coupled with a Ministerial Council for Child Wellbeing to provide the mechanism for monitoring and responding to emerging legislative, policy and service delivery issues affecting children and their families.²²

Operating at the frontline, not-for-profit (NFP) organisations are among the best sources of information about what works to tackle social and other challenges and are well-positioned to reflect and give voice to marginalised groups in society.

This proposal addresses a gap in national policy advisory capacity in relation to multicultural children and is aligned with the recommendations of Department of Social Services' recently published *NFP Sector Development Blueprint*²³ which noted that multicultural organisations and bodies make a crucial contribution to maintaining Australia's resilience and social cohesion through their specialised and trusted intermediary roles between culturally diverse communities and policy makers. This vantage point allows for the creation of fit-for-purpose initiatives that are community-informed and culturally safe; driving inclusive practice and policy innovation that the Australian Government can draw upon to make better decisions on behalf of multicultural communities.

A national multicultural children's body is also consistent with the direction of the *Multicultural Framework Review's*²⁴ recommendations and intent for initiatives to promote multiculturalism, social cohesion and inclusion through greater cooperation between government and community.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ McMahon, T., & Nguyen, T. (2024). *Policy brief: Hitting the mark: specialised responses in services and initiatives for a multicultural Australia*. Retrieved from https://www.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Policy-Brief_Hitting-the-mark_digital.pdf

²⁰ McMahon, T., Mortimer, P., Karatasas, K., Asif, N., Delfabbro, P., Cashmore, J., & Taylor, A. (2021). *Culturally Diverse Children in Out-of-Home Care: Safety, Wellbeing, Cultural and Family Connections. Pathways of Care Longitudinal Study: Outcomes of Children and Young People in Out-of-Home Care*. Research Report Number 20. Sydney. NSW Department of Communities and Justice.

²¹ Hollonds, A. (2024, December 10). Op. cit.; ARACY. (2024). *ARACY Amplified 2024-25*. Retrieved from: <https://www.aracy.org.au/our-advocacy/>

²² Hollonds, A. (2024, December 10). Op. cit.

²³ Blueprint Expert Reference Group (2024). Op. cit.

²⁴ Australian Government. (2024). *Towards Fairness: A multicultural Australia for all*. Retrieved from <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/multicultural-framework-review/Documents/report-summary/multicultural-framework-review-report-english.pdf>

Proposal 3: Pilot a Navigators Model to optimise people with disabilities' access and use of foundational supports and the National Disability Insurance Scheme

Proposal description

The Australian Government should fund the development, implementation and evaluation of a Pilot Navigators Model to optimise people with disabilities' access and use of foundational supports and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and improve accessibility, navigation and engagement for all people with disability.

Delivery timeframes

2025-26 ongoing over the forward estimates.

Rationale and impact

Ten years after its establishment, the uptake of the NDIS by people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds continues to be much lower than the rest of the Australian population, despite having similar rates of profound or severe disability. The NDIA projected that by 2019, around 20% of NDIS participants would be from CALD backgrounds;²⁵ however, in the first quarter of 2024-25, the proportion of CALD participants entering and receiving a NDIS plan was only 6.9%.²⁶

Lower levels of access are not related to lower levels of need but rather due to difficulties in navigating and accessing services that are culturally responsive. People with disability from CALD backgrounds may experience multiple barriers to access such as: lack of accessible information; disability services not being culturally responsive; social isolation; lack of knowledge about a complex service system and lack of comparable systems in their home country; cultural stigma surrounding disability; and distrust of government agencies due to negative experiences in other countries.²⁷ Similar navigation challenges arise for people with disability from CALD backgrounds accessing foundational supports and mainstream services. For NDIS participants of all backgrounds, there have been a significant increase in administrative backlog due to multiple changes in programs and systems arising from the NDIS reform process.

SSI's experience of NDIS participants' navigation challenges, as a current provider of the current Partners in the Community (PITC)/Local Area Coordination Program funded by the NDIA, has been identified as a sector-wide issue by the recent *NDIS Review*.²⁸ The *Review* has emphasised the critical importance of implementing a navigators model into the future. The Review panel's recommendations envisage targeted interventions to enhance the people with disability's experience of the NDIS. Accordingly, this proposal is for the Government to pilot the navigators model on a small scale to assess its effectiveness and inform the design of a prospective national rollout.

The Navigators Pilot would establish a network of local Navigators alongside existing SSI teams to bridge gaps, provide personalised support, and empower individuals to navigate the NDIS' complexities including with respect to accessing mainstream services and foundational supports which are currently being designed in partnership with states and territories. The Navigators will play a pivotal role in successfully ensuring that people with disability, their families and communities receive timely information and access to appropriate

²⁵ National Disability Insurance Agency. (2018). *Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Strategy 2018*.

²⁶ NDIS. (2024). *NDIS Quarterly Report to Disability Ministers Quarter 1 2024*. Retrieved from <https://www.ndis.gov.au/about-us/publications/quarterly-reports>

²⁷ Mortimer, P., & McMahon, T. (2018). *Still Outside the Tent*. Retrieved from https://www.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Still_outside_the_tent_Accessible.pdf

²⁸ Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2023). Op. cit.

services and have the capacity to exercise their rights. Essentially, the Navigators Pilot will substantially support the aim to create a more inclusive, responsive and sustainable disability support system.

The Navigators Pilot will assess and evaluate the viability and potential of the *NDIS Review's* recommendation for a navigators model. SSI is well positioned to deliver this Pilot, having implemented and performed strongly the Local Area Coordination Program in Sydney and Southwest Sydney since 2020.

Prior to this, SSI delivered Ability Links NSW in similarly regions of Sydney for five years. Ability Links was established in 2014 as the NSW approach to Local Area Coordination prior to establishment of the NDIS and worked with all people with disability through Linkers employed to assist people to develop and meet goals and work with local services to support inclusion.

An independent evaluation of SSI's delivery of Ability Links found that it was particularly effective in working with CALD people with disabilities.²⁹ Notably, the state-wide evaluation of Ability Links found that other providers of Ability Links in NSW were less successful in reaching CALD people with disabilities.³⁰ Implementing Ability Links has been part of the foundation for SSI's long-lasting footprint and connection with communities where we deliver the Partners in the Community (PiTC) program today.

“Ability Links helped me to understand and access NDIS and get it approved which has made a huge difference. Nothing would have happened without them because of the language barrier.”³¹ SSI Ability Links Participant

The Pilot could be trialled as either an extension of the current PiTC or a separate project that runs alongside PiTC. Either way, the Pilot site should focus on regions with highly diverse communities that have critical needs and significant localised barriers/challenges to foundational supports and the NDIS.

Furthermore, the Navigators Pilot must leverage an established, highly effective, specialised workforce who reflect the local demographics and who have genuine connections, knowledge and links to local services. SSI's experience is optimally positioned to be utilised in this proposed Navigators Pilot, as it has strong local knowledge and networks to support people with disability from a diversity of backgrounds.

Policy alignment

This proposal aligns with the recommendations of the *Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (the Disability Royal Commission)*³² and the *NDIS Review*.³³ Improving navigation supports the Disability Reform Ministerial Council *Roadmap for 2024 and 2025's*³⁴ goal to build more inclusive and accessible systems, services, communities and workplaces for all people with disability.

The *NDIS Review* emphasised that people with disability from CALD backgrounds often require additional support to navigate the disability and mainstream/foundational support systems.

²⁸ Mortimer, P., & McMahon, T. (2018). Op. cit.

³⁰ Urbis. (2016). *Ability Links NSW Final Evaluation Report*. Urbis/NSW FACS.

³¹ ARTD Consultants/SSI. (2023b). *Summary of evaluation of SSI's Ability Links*. Retrieved from https://www.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Evaluation_of_ALNSW_Summary_Final.pdf

³² Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (2024). *Final Report*. Retrieved from <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/final-report>

³³ Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2023). Op. cit.

³⁴ Disability Reform Ministerial Council. (2024). *Disability Reform Roadmap for 2024 and 2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.dss.gov.au/system/files/resources/final-publication-disability-reform-roadmap-ac.pdf>

The Pilot has the potential to advance the *NDIS Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Strategy 2024 – 2028*'s ³⁵ goal and Action Plan³⁶ to improve the NDIS' accessibility, navigation and engagement, specifically for CALD communities and participants.

Finally, the proposal would support the recommendation of the Australian Government's *Multicultural Framework Review*³⁷ for a stronger partnership between the Department of Home Affairs and NDIS to support newly arrived refugees with a disability.

³⁵ National Disability Insurance Agency. (2024a). *Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Strategy 2024-2028*. Retrieved from <https://www.ndis.gov.au/media/6947/download?attachment>

³⁶ National Disability Insurance Agency. (2024b). *Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Strategy Action Plan 2024-2028*. Retrieved from <https://www.ndis.gov.au/media/6946/download?attachment>

³⁷ Australian Government (2024). *Op. cit.*

Proposal 4: Reinvest and embed dedicated domestic and family violence prevention initiatives across settlement programs

Proposal Description

The Australian Government should increase investment and provide a dedicated enhancement to settlement services to implement and embed domestic and family violence (DFV) screening and response in the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) Program and the upcoming Humanitarian Integration and Settlement Program (HISP). This dedicated capacity would include specialised DFV workers supporting the existing settlement workforce to implement best practice DFV identification and response for women accessing settlement programs.

Delivery timeframes

2025-26 and ongoing over the forward estimates.

Rationale and impact

Around one third of refugee women in Australia are estimated to have experienced DFV³⁸ while also facing several post-migration challenges as part of their settlement.

The impacts of DFV are profound and have long-term implications for women, children and families. It is a leading cause of trauma, child protection concerns and interventions, homelessness, and a leading contributor to the burden of disease experienced by women, negatively impacting their mental and physical health. DFV harms children in similar ways, regardless of whether they are the direct targets of abuse. DFV-related childhood harms multiply the risk of common mental health problems³⁹ such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, and substance use disorders.

DFV can therefore impact the settlement and integration trajectories of refugee and migrant women and their children across multiple outcome areas. Prevention and early intervention is critical to reduce the risk of significant long-term negative outcomes for refugee women, children and families.

A range of human services already recommend screening and response to identify and address needs and concerns for women in priority populations⁴⁰ (e.g., ante-natal care across Australian jurisdictions); these approaches are also recommended as part of national responses to DFV.⁴¹ Screening for DFV involves asking all women a small number of questions about experiences of violence at home. Asking women directly about experiences of abuse increases disclosure and creates opportunity for supportive and timely responses by services. That said, identifying and responding to DFV demands specialised skills and tailored responses to ensure the safety of women and children is not jeopardised.⁴²

³⁸ Segrave, M., R. Wickes, & C., Keel. (2021). *Migrant and Refugee Women in Australia: The Safety and Security Survey*. Monash University. Retrieved from <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2021-06/apo-nid313003.pdf>

³⁹ Haslam, D. M., Lawrence, D. M., Mathews, B., Higgins, D. J., Hunt, A., Scott, J. G., Dunne, M. P., Erskine, H. E., Thomas, H. J., Finkelhor, D., Pacella, R., Meinck, F., & Malacova, E. (2023). The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), a national survey of the prevalence of child maltreatment and its correlates: methodology. *Med J Aust*, 218: S5-S12. Retrieved from https://www.mja.com.au/system/files/2023-03/MJA2_v218_is6_Iss2Press_Text.pdf

⁴⁰ US Preventive Services Task Force (2018), *Screening for intimate partner violence, elder abuse, and abuse of vulnerable adults: Final Recommendation Statement*. *JAMA*, 320(16), 1678-1687. Retrieved from https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/home/getfilebytoken/94EGaPfA7-rqrR_xhaA2Yc

⁴¹ 1800 RESPECT. (2024). *Understanding screening*. Retrieved from <https://www.1800respect.org.au/resources-and-tools/screening>

⁴² Ibid.

The Safety and Health After Intervention (SAHAR) study over three years, funded by the Australian Research Council and SSI, led by researchers at the University of Wollongong is an example of leveraging additional touchpoints to implement DFV screening and response for refugee women accessing settlement services.⁴³

The study demonstrated the feasibility of implementing DFV screening in settlement services with refugee women, confirming that screening is accepted and supported by women, including those who themselves had experienced DFV.⁴⁴ For most women, the SAHAR study was their first experience of being asked about DFV underscoring that settlement services provide an additional touchpoint to expand DFV prevention and early intervention.

Settlement staff reported that asking about DFV provided opportunities for disclosure and support and their practice was aided by clear and simple tools, dedicated training and specialised mentoring support. Central to this successful implementation of DFV screening and response about DFV were worker care and skills, language matching, the creation of safe spaces, and the use of female workers. Essential to maintaining access to DFV screening and support by refugee and migrant women, is dedicated funding investment.⁴⁵

“When you get to talk to the right person, speak about what happened, I feel lightened and find out solutions to my problems.”⁴⁶ Refugee Woman, SAHAR Participant

The 2021-22 Federal Budget provided a funding enhancement of \$29.3 million over three years that allowed settlement services to embed tailored interventions to support migrant and refugee women experiencing violence.⁴⁷ SSI’s NSW Settlement Partnership invested this enhancement in training, a Community of Practice and direct support which led to increased demand for support from women in relation to DFV. While the measure was due to expire at the end 2023-24 it was extended in the 2024-25 Federal Budget, but with substantially less funding than previously allocated which has reversed the gains made in responding to escalating reports of DFV among women and children in settlement services.⁴⁸

Reinvesting and increasing investment in dedicated DFV prevention in settlement services would:

- meet the overarching aims of expanding DFV prevention and specifically, Recommendation 14, of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet’s *Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches* to, “*build the specialist DFV workforce and expand workforce capability of all services that frequently engage with victim-survivors and people who use violence*” [p. 20]⁴⁹

⁴³ Spangaro, J., Spence, N., Cameron, J., Hegarty, K., Koziol-McLain, J., Man, N., McMahon, T., Perry, A., Toole-Anstey, C., Walsh, J., & Zwi, A. (2024). *Domestic Violence Identification and Response for Refugee Women in Settlement Services (The SAHAR Study)*. Research Report. University of Wollongong. Retrieved from <https://apo.org.au/node/327993>

⁴⁴ Spence, N., Spangaro, J., Hegarty, K., Man, N., Cameron, J., Koziol-McLain, J., McMahon, T., Perry-Indermaur, A., Toole-Anstey, C., Walsh, J., & Zwi, A. (2024). The acceptability of intimate partner violence screening and response among refugee women accessing Australian resettlement services. *PLOS One*, in press.

⁴⁵ Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety. (2020). *Multicultural and Settlement services Supporting women experiencing violence: the MuSeS project* (Research to Policy and Practice, 11/2020). Sydney: ANROWS. Retrieved from <https://anrows-2019.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/26060304/ANROWS-RtPP-Vaughn-MuSeS.pdf>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA). (2024, May 15). *Budget sees welcome investment in settlement services, but under delivers for migrant women experiencing domestic violence*. Retrieved from <https://scoa.org.au/budget-sees-welcome-investment-in-settlement-services-but-under-delivers-for-migrant-women-experiencing-domestic-violence/>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024). *Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches*. Retrieved from <https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/womens-safety/rapid-review-prevention-approaches>

- nationally provide women and children accessing settlement services with culturally safe pathways to identify and respond to DFV consistent with the Department of Home Affairs *Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework*⁵⁰
- contribute to the Government's goals to end violence against women and children under *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032*.

Australia's ongoing crisis of domestic and family violence demands increased investment in prevention efforts that use all the levers available to governments. The Australian Government can enhance its response by reinvesting in dedicated DFV prevention in settlement programs funded by the Department of Home Affairs to provide specialised and dedicated DFV identification and response for refugee and migrant women.

Policy alignment

This proposal aligns with the *National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032* and its focus on tailoring prevention, early intervention and responses to women and children at greater risk of DFV.⁵¹

This proposal also strongly aligns with the recommendations from the *Rapid Review of Prevention Approaches* to address DFV commissioned by the Prime Minister in response to a rise in DFV-related homicides which was handed to the Australian Government in August 2024.⁵² The report from that review provides advice to strengthen and add momentum to DFV prevention and, in light of continued rises in DFV-related homicides among women and children, calls for all governments in Australia to expand their approach to prevention and “leverage all prevention touchpoints more effectively” [p.6].⁵³

At a programmatic level, the proposal is consistent with the Australian Government's intention to enhance and improve its existing investment in settlement programs as articulated in the Department of Home Affairs *Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework*.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2024). *Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework*. Retrieved from <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/settlement-policy-and-reform/refugee-and-humanitarian-entrant-settlement-and-integration-outcomes-framework>

⁵¹ Australian Government Department of Social Services. (2022). *National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032*. Retrieved from <https://www.dss.gov.au/national-plan-end-gender-based-violence>

⁵² Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024). Op. cit.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs. (2024). *Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework*. Retrieved from <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/settlement-policy-and-reform/refugee-and-humanitarian-entrant-settlement-and-integration-outcomes-framework>

Proposal 5: Enable, develop and improve the community sector's sustainability and impact

Proposal Description

Strengthen the not-for-profit sector through a staged implementation of the actions put forward in the *National Not-For-Profit Sector Blueprint* to create an enabling environment, ensure greater diversity in the community sector, and commit to fund the full cost of service delivery and provide indexation in a fair, transparent and consistent manner across all relevant government portfolios and community service grant programs.

The Australian Government should:

- provide a transparent response on each of the actions recommended by the Not-for Profit Sector Development *Blueprint*.
- progress and monitor actions to fund the full cost of service delivery, including indexation consistently across government portfolios and funded organisations, and minimum term contract and renewal periods.
- invest in multicultural community organisations to support effective co-design and engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse communities in policy and service design, implementation and evaluation.

Delivery timeframes

2025-26 and ongoing over the forward estimates.

Rationale and impact

The community sector is vital to Australia's social, cultural, economic and civic fabric and is an important driver of economic activity employing approximately one in ten workers.⁵⁵ This amounts to 1.47 million people or 10.5% of the working population.⁵⁶ This workforce is comparable in size to that of the mining, manufacturing and agriculture, forestry and fisheries sectors combined, and is on par with that of construction (1.2 million) and retail trade (1.4 million).⁵⁷ Unlike these sectors, however, the charity sector also engages 3.2 million volunteers, who contribute upwards of 320 million unpaid hours valued at an additional \$13.8 billion.⁵⁸

The community sector plays a substantial role in the realisation of public reforms across a range of policy areas. For example, multicultural organisations have specialised capacity and capability to facilitate co-design between multicultural communities and the Australian Government to enable policy and practice innovation.

This innovation adds value, generating a social return on investment. For example, Ignite® is an SSI social enterprise that, since its establishment in 2014, supports people interested in exploring self-employment who cannot access mainstream supports due to systemic, cultural, financial, social and accessibility barriers. In 2023-24, Ignite® mentored almost 250 individuals and saw 62 businesses operating independently.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Muir, K., & Riddell, S. (2020, August 20). The overlooked rule of economic recovery: don't take charities for granted. *The Mandarin*. Retrieved from <https://www.themandarin.com.au/137883-theoverlooked-rule-of-economic-recovery-dont-take-charities-for-granted/>

⁵⁶ Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC). (2024). *Australian Charities Report: 10th Edition*. Retrieved from <https://www.acnc.gov.au/tools/reports/australian-charities-report-10th-edition>

⁵⁷ ABS, 2024 cited in Blueprint Reference Expert Group (2024). Op. cit.

⁵⁸ The Centre for Volunteering. (2024). *Cost of Volunteering Calculator: Measure the value that volunteers bring to your organisation*. Retrieved from <https://www.volunteering.com.au/resources-tools/cost-of-volunteering-calculator/>

⁵⁹ SSI. (2024). *Ignite® Impact Report 2024*. Retrieved from <https://ignite.ssi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Ignite-Impact-Report-2024.pdf>

*“Your support means a lot for me. I also wanted to share with you that you were the first person in Australia to acknowledge my past experiences and skills, and who gave me the chance to help others (and to myself to regain my self-confidence). Actually, I might have cried a little after our first interview because of happiness”.*⁶⁰

Ignite® Participant

The current government reform processes, including the *Not-for-Profit Sector Development Blueprint*⁶¹ submitted to the Australian Government in November 2024, recognise and seek to address the significant challenges impacting on the community sector including rising operational costs, escalating demand for support, workforce shortages and a reduction in volunteerism.

These challenges are longstanding but have been amplified by rising cost-of-living and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate related natural disasters.⁶² One of the key drivers of these issues is insufficient funding of community sector ‘indirect costs’ such as information technology, administration, human resources and staff learning and development.⁶³

There have been several instances where indexation or wage supplementation have not been applied consistently across government portfolios. The October 2022-23 Federal Mini-Budget included \$560 million funding supplementation to community sector organisations which did not include settlement service providers and migrant organisations funded by the Department of Home Affairs. This resulted in funding cuts in real terms, with reduced staffing and redundancies and the cessation of some critical settlement initiatives.⁶⁴

Similarly, the 2023-24 Federal Budget provided a \$4 billion injection of funding over four years to support organisations, including community sector organisations with higher service delivery costs and increased demand. Despite this, funding from the Department of Home Affairs to settlement service providers was again not included. Eventually, following concerted advocacy by the community sector, some indexation was provided. In early 2024 the Government announced a decision mandating all government agencies to pass on indexation to community sector grant recipients, which is a welcome development.⁶⁵

At the same time, longer-term funding contracts are needed to enable community service organisations to develop collaborative partnerships needed to deliver services. For example, in refugee settlement short-term contracts limit the ability of settlement services providers to develop longer-term relationships and partnerships with real estate agents, community housing providers, and developers to address housing needs.

Government stewardship, investment and commitment to the community sector will ensure Australia continues to reap the benefits of the community sector in enabling strong, cohesive communities through collaboration and partnerships that help people feel and be included, connected and valued.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Blueprint Reference Expert Group. (2024). *Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint*. Retrieved from <https://www.dss.gov.au/panels-and-other-groups/resource/not-profit-sector-development-blueprint>

⁶² Australian Government Department of Social Services. (2023). *A stronger, more diverse and independent community sector*. Retrieved from <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/stronger-more-diverse-independent-community-sector-1.pdf>

⁶³ Social Ventures Australia. (2023). *Paying what it takes: funding indirect costs to create long-term impact*. Retrieved from <https://www.socialventures.com.au/assets/Paying-what-it-takes.pdf>

⁶⁴ SCOA. (2022, October 27). *Media Release: Budget takes first step in building a more welcoming society*. retrieved from <https://scoa.org.au/media-release-budget-takes-first-step-in-building-a-more-welcoming-society/>

⁶⁵ SCOA. (2023, July 31). *Media Release: SCOA welcomes investment for vital settlement services*. Retrieved from <https://scoa.org.au/scoa-welcomes-investment-for-vital-settlement-services/>

Policy alignment

The community sector submitted the *Not-for-Profit Sector Development Blueprint*⁶⁶ to the Australian Government in November 2024 and is working with the government to progress a review led by the Department of Social Services on the operation of grants to community sector organisations. These two complementary reform processes are intended to meet the Labor Government's pre-election commitment to support a *stronger, more diverse and independent community sector*.⁶⁷ The *Blueprint*, which outlines a 10-year vision for the community sector, was developed by an expert reference group with support from the Department of Social Services. It is vital that the Australian Government provides a transparent response on all 18 actions recommended in the *Blueprint*.

The *Not-for-Profit Sector Development Blueprint*⁶⁸ identified a need for greater investment to improve the diversity of representation particularly in relation to First Nations communities, people with disabilities and multicultural communities. Funding for multicultural community organisations allows them to assist in effective co-design and intermediate between communities to enable policy and practice innovation. Supporting the development of a culturally safe and fit-for purpose evidence base that represents and strengthens diverse communities to inform policy and services is crucial to a resilient and socially cohesive Australia. This is consistent with the recommendations of the Multicultural Framework Review⁶⁹ which reported to the Australian Government in July 2024.

SSI's recommendations in this area align strongly with actions in the *Blueprint* and with the longstanding positions of peak bodies including ACOSS, FECCA and the Community Council of Australia to invest in quality community services and achieve a more stable financial and regulatory framework that enables all not-for-profits to deliver publicly funded programs and services sustainably to maximise impact.

⁶⁶ Blueprint Reference Expert Group. (2024). *Not-for-profit Sector Development Blueprint*. Retrieved from <https://www.dss.gov.au/panels-and-other-groups/resource/not-profit-sector-development-blueprint>

⁶⁷ Burney, L., McAllister, J., Leigh, A. & Templeman, S. (2022, March 15). *Restoring respect for community sector – Media Release*. Retrieved from https://www.andrewleigh.com/restoring_respect_for_community_sector_media_release

⁶⁸ Blueprint Reference Expert Group (2024). Op. cit.

⁶⁹ Australian Government (2024). Op. cit.