



**Migration Institute
of Australia**

Supporting strong and sustainable regions

Review of Regional Migration Settings

July 2024

Migration Institute of Australia

The Migration Institute of Australia (MIA) is the oldest professional association representing migration professionals in Australia, being initially established as the Australian Migration Consultants Association in 1987, before changing its name to the MIA in 1992. Through its public profile the MIA advocates the value of migration, thereby supporting the wider migration advice profession, migrants and prospective migrants to Australia. The MIA represents its members through regular government liaison, advocacy, public speaking and media engagements. The MIA supports its members through its separate but interrelated sections: professional support; education; membership; communications; media; business development and marketing.

The MIA operates as a company limited by guarantee under the Corporations Act 2001 and complies with all Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) requirements. The MIA is not empowered under its Constitution to pay dividends. The MIA and its elected office bearers are guided by the legal framework set out in the Corporations Act 2001, the MIA Constitution and Rules, the Corporate Governance Statement and Board Charter.

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Statement of Recognition

The Migration Institute of Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders, past, present and emerging, acknowledging their continuing relationship to this land and the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across Australia

The Department of Home Affairs
Supporting Strong and Sustainable
Regions Consultation

The Migration Institute of Australia (MIA) thanks the Department of Home Affairs for the opportunity to provide input into the *Supporting strong and sustainable regions consultation*.

This response submission is informed by the practical experiences of MIA Registered Migration Agent members and recommendations from the MIA Regional Migration Committee which is constituted from MIA members who live and practice in a broad variety of regional areas across Australia.

The MIA provides commentary and recommendations designed to assist in the Department of Home Affairs in developing strategies designed to increase regional migration and settlement.

Please feel free to contact Bronwyn Markey at Bronwyn.Markey@mia.org.au or on 02 9249 9000 if you require further assistance or information this response submission.



Reuben Saul
National President
Migration Institute of Australia
26 July 2024

Recommendations

The Migration Institute of Australia makes the following recommendations in response to the Department of Home Affairs Supporting strong and sustainable regions discussion paper.

The MIA recommends that:

1. the visa requirements for the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional be more closely aligned with those of the Temporary Skills Shortage visa
2. the use of the Regional Occupation List to determine regional occupations eligible for employer sponsorship or state and territory nomination be abandoned
3. occupations eligible for regional employer sponsorship or state and territory nomination be all those classified as ANZSCO Skill levels 1 to 3
4. the requirement for formal skills assessment for Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional visas be aligned with those occupations requiring skills assessment in the current Temporary Skills Shortage subclass
5. the age threshold for the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional visa stream be increased to below 50 years at time of application
6. the threshold work experience requirement for the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional visa stream be aligned with that of the current Temporary Skills Shortage subclass
7. a regional 10% reduction in the Temporary Skilled Migration Income Threshold be applied to the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional visa subclass
8. the requirement for certification of the local Annual Market Salary Rate by Regional Certifying Bodies be removed
9. any review of the Skilling Australians Fund levy considers the burden this charge imposes on regional employers
10. the refund policies associated with the Skilling Australians Fund levy be reviewed for procedural fairness to the business sponsors
11. labour market testing requirement be removed for Category 3 regional areas
12. the definition of regional area be aligned across all areas of Government to better meet the needs of these communities

The MIA recommends that (continued):

13. The MIA recommends that further concessions be available to the more remote areas of Australia currently defined as Category 3 locations.
14. the Working Holiday Maker visa requirement to undertake specified regional work not be removed
15. the Department of Home Affairs implements an online Working Holiday Employer registration system to increase protection of Working Holiday Makers undertaking regional work
16. both employers and labour hire companies using Working Holiday Maker visa holders be registered in this system
17. the Department of Home Affairs requires Working Holiday Makers to register when commencing work with a registered Working Holiday Maker employer
18. the online registration portal for Working Holiday Maker employers, also provide access to information employers and Working Holiday Makers on Australian workplace rights and contacts for the Fair Work Ombudsman and other relevant support services
19. the specified regional work criteria for third Working Holiday Visa eligibility be reduced from six months to three months
20. any work undertaken in Category 3 regional locations be accepted for second and third Working Holiday Visa eligibility
21. the Department of Home Affairs refunds the visa application charge apply nil application charges for those Working Holiday maker applicants who have completed specified regional work and apply for subsequent second and third visas
22. Working Holiday Makers intending to undertake specified regional work be provided subsidised travel to and from regional locations
23. Condition 8547 be removed for those Working Holiday Makers who undertake regional work in Categories 2 and 3 locations

The MIA recommends that (continued):

24. the current provisional visa setting not be changed at this time
25. further resources be devoted to local settlement and integration programs for regional migrants
26. a regional settlement services framework be developed to inform the design of regional settlement and retention strategies
27. stakeholders across all levels of government, service providers and community representatives have input into the development of the regional settlement services framework
28. sufficient funding is provided to dedicated volunteer and community organisations providing settlement services to regional migrants

Introduction

In 2019 broad swathes of Australia were declared 'regional' by the Department of Home Affairs (Home Affairs) under a new definition of the term for migration purposes. These regions are not homogenous, encompassing variously, whole states and territories, regional cities within close travelling distance to major metropolitan cities, mid-size regional centres, right through to tiny rural and remote locations with only a handful of residents. The economic and living conditions of these regional areas differ widely, ranging from those with buoyant economies and offering good long term prospects for residents, to those with little in the way of job prospects and services.

Any regional migration strategies must be flexible to serve and support these differences while also recognising that migration strategies alone cannot be used to address regional depopulation and labour shortages. Regional migration strategies must be embedded in a whole of government approach to building strong and sustainable regions.

Regional migration policy must be part of an overall population and infrastructure strategy that allows regional residents relative comparability and amenity to metropolitan living, with viable employment opportunities, local infrastructure providing adequate health services, schools, training and other education services, suitable accommodation choices, transport and a welcoming community. It is these crucial elements that will not only encourage regional migration, but continued settlement in regional areas.

The factors that contribute to successful local and migrant settlement outcomes are well understood, having been identified in extensive Australian and international research. Across Australia there are multiple authorities¹ that research population growth, settlement and movement patterns, and multilateral government authorities² that exist to develop local regions.

This research demonstrates that migrants who experience a positive and fulfilling regional settlement experience, rather than time serving before attaining permanent residency, are more likely to settle longer term in these locations. Economic and social integration in the initial settlement location are key factors that influence successful settlement and as such should form the focus of strategies to retain these migrants in those locations.

All the elements to encourage successful regional migrant settlement already exist in Australia and could be leveraged with suitable regional migration strategies to improve the success of Australia's regional migration program.

The MIA provides in this response to the Home Affairs Supporting Strong and Sustainable regions discussion paper, recommendations by its members based on the professional experiences of providing migration advice and assistance to regional stakeholders, businesses and international migrants.

¹ For example: Regional Institute of Australia publications, Welcoming Cities initiatives, Department of Social Services settlement services.

² For example: Regional Development Australia (RDA) is an Australian Government funded initiative of a national network of 52 committees made up of local leaders who work with all levels of government, business and community groups to support the development of their regions.

As requested in the Home Affairs workshops conducted in association with the release of this discussion paper, the MIA has recommended higher level policy strategies and program levers to improve the flexibility of the regional migration visa classes, simplify the various elements of the current program and combat exploitation of vulnerable migrants living and working in regions, all with the aim of increasing the retention and settlement of migrants in these regional areas.

Question 1

How can the various temporary and permanent visas available to the regions work together to better meet skills needs? For example, Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMAs) and regional employer sponsored visas.

There is currently a suite of ten temporary and permanent visa classes that may be used to meet Australia's complex regional labour force needs. In addition, there are Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMA) and Labour Agreements (LA) which sit outside but make use of these visa programs. This array of visas and agreements requires employers and applicants to interact with multiple stakeholders, including state/territory governments, regional area representatives, skills assessment authorities, as well the Department of Home Affairs (Home Affairs).

Visa Subclass	Subclass	Status	Regional features
Employer nomination scheme	186	Perm	Concessions under DAMA and LA streams
Skilled independent	189	Perm	5 regional points
Skilled nominated	190	Perm	State/Territory nominated (STN)
Permanent residence (Skilled Regional)	191	Perm	Previously held provisional visa
Skilled Regional*	887	Perm	Previously held regional temporary visa
Temporary Skills Shortage	482	Temp	Concessions under DAMA and LA
Skilled Work Regional (Provisional)	491	Temp	STN or regional family
Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional	494	Temp	Yes
Skilled Regional (Provisional)	489	Temp	STN
Pacific Australian Labour Mobility	403	Temp	Regional only
Working Holiday Maker	417/462	Temp	Regional work required for further stay

Table 1. All visas available for use in regional areas.

Note: RSMS omitted as transitional arrangements ending; * Visa subclass will cease by operation of time.

The MIA contends that this complexity reduces the potential and effectiveness of regional visa products and that the system would benefit from rationalisation and simplification. The administrative burden and cost to users, as well as processing times, could be reduced with a simpler approach to the regional visa program.

The Migration Strategy is focussed on delivering a system that is simpler, more efficient and fairer.³ The MIA finds that reducing complexity both within regional visa subclasses and the criteria for these visas aligns with the Strategy's objectives.

To this end, the MIA provides a new model for regional temporary employer sponsored visas that incorporates:

- changes from using six digit occupations to create skills lists, to the use of ANZSCO skill level classifications to determine occupations eligible for employer sponsorship or nomination under state and territory subclasses
- the use of DAMA or LA only where the employer wishes to depart from the approved ANZSCO skill levels, English language levels or other visa criteria
- adjust the requirements for the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional Subclass 494 visa to make this more attractive to regional migration applicants by being less onerous and less costly.

Simplifying regional migration products

Previous regional employer sponsored subclass migration programs provided greater flexibility to regional employers and focussed on positive incentives to encourage migrants to settle outside metropolitan areas. These incentives included the use of ANZSCO skill levels rather than discrete occupation codes and less work experience. Concessions were also available for skilled migrants' age, threshold salaries and levels of English language proficiency.

In 2018, as part of the overhaul of employer sponsored visas generally, many of these concessional arrangements were removed. This included lowering of the maximum age from 50 to 45 years for the primary applicant.

In November 2019, the Subclass 494 Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional Visa (SESR) came into effect, heralding a change from incentive based concessions to tougher visa criteria. The SESR increased English proficiency levels, required every applicant to undergo skills assessment, increased the work experience threshold and introduced longer temporary residency before becoming eligible for permanent residency. The only 'concession' to remain for applicants was the broader range of occupations through the Regional Occupation List (ROL). The work experience changes at that time also closed this visa to international students who had studied in Australia, as there was no visa available at that time that allowed them to meet the work experience threshold. This has to some extent been rectified with the longer validity Temporary Graduate Subclass 485 visa, with longer validity for those who studied and remained in regional areas.

³ Department of Home Affairs, Migration Strategy 2023, p 36. <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/programs-subsite/migration-strategy/Documents/migration-strategy.pdf>

These requirements were very much in excess of the Subclass 482 Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) visa that is available to all employer sponsors including regional employers. Table 2 below provides a comparison of these requirements.

Requirements	Temporary Skill Shortage - Subclass 482	Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional - Subclass 494
Occupations	Total – 508 (across three lists)	Total 650 – (across two lists)
English	Overall 5/no less than 4.5/5 in any component (no English requirements for secondary applicants)	Competent – IELTS 6 in all components (secondary applicants require functional English)
Skills assessment	25 specified occupations (for a limited number of countries)	All 650 occupations
Previous experience	2 years in occupation (reducing to 1 year in Nov 2024)	3 years in occupation
Age threshold	Nil	Below 45 years at time of application
Threshold income	\$73,150	\$73,150
Eligibility for PR	SC 186 after two years	SC 191 - After three years on this visa and having worked all or part of that time for three financial years

Table 2: Comparison of current TSS and SESR criteria.

While the premise for the SESR more stringent threshold criteria was to better equip migrants to integrate in regional areas, these have instead led to the lower uptake of the subclass and the veritable explosion of Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMAs), Industry Labour Agreements and Company Specific Labour Agreements (LAs), to compensate for the inflexibility within the system.

The MIA recommends that the SESR subclass be adjusted to align more closely to the TSS visa. Home Affairs data demonstrates that the uptake of this visa has been lower than previous regional visas⁴ and employing sponsors will often elect to use the TSS visa where possible in regional areas, due to the more onerous requirements of the SESR for both parties.

Recommendation 1

The MIA recommends that the visa requirements for the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional be more closely aligned with those of the Temporary Skills Shortage visa.

⁴ Department of Home Affairs, 2024, Supporting strong and sustainable regions discussion paper, p 16
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The changes recommended by the MIA to the SESR, together with the added benefits this provisional visa affords regional migrants, would serve to make this version of the SESR a more attractive option for employers and applicants. The MIA's model incorporates the following features:

Requirements	Subclass 482 Temporary Skill Shortage	Subclass 494 Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional stream
Occupations	Expected to change with incoming CSOL	Any ANZSCO Skills List 1 - 3 occupation ¹
English	Equivalent of IELTS 5/no less than 4.5 in any component	Competent – IELTS 6 overall/no less than 4.5 in any component ²
Skills assessment	25 specified occupations (for a limited number of countries)	25 specified occupations (for a limited number of countries) ³
Previous experience	2 years in occupation (reducing to 1 year in Nov 2024)	2 years in occupation (reducing to 1 year in Nov 2024) ⁴
Age threshold	Nil	Below 50 years at time of application ⁵
Threshold income	\$73,150	90% reduction in TSMIT and local AMSR ⁶
Eligibility for PR	SC 186 after two years	SC 191 - After three years on this visa and having worked all or part of that time for three financial years

Table 3: Comparison proposed TSS - Regional stream with the current TSS stream.

¹ More flexible access to a broader range of occupations would be provided through the use of ANZSCO skill levels, rather than the current skills lists, to determine which occupations could be sponsored or nominated for regional migration.

ANZSCO Skill levels are a subset of the information used to develop the occupation subgroups. These use the complexity of a job, the formal education or training, and/or on-the-job training requirements to assign occupations to skill levels. Comparable jobs fall within the same skills levels.

While ANZSCO six digit occupation codes are used to create skilled migration lists,⁵ these occupations generally also fall within ANZSCO skill levels 1-3. These occupations include managerial, professional and trade occupations, which have formal qualifications or equivalent, and range from Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) Certificate III up to higher degrees.

It is the use of six digit occupation codes that reduces the flexibility of these lists and has contributed to the growth in DAMAs and LAs. The MIA suggests an alternative approach that would return flexibility to the system and reduce the need for extensive DAMAs and LAs. For positions located in

⁵ Jobs and Skills Australia, Core Skills Occupation List <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/topics/migration-strategy/draft-core-skills-occupations-list-csol-consultation>. Other skills lists, devised to meet specific migration needs such as the Regional Occupation List or Training Visas, may include lower ANZSCO Skill level occupations.

regional areas and for employer sponsored or state/territory nominated subclasses, all ANZSCO skills levels 1-3 should be available for these visas. Any occupation that falls within the 1-3 skills level would be eligible for sponsorship or nomination.

Advantages to this approach:

Reduction in the need for DAMAs and LAs as no occupations would be excluded at those levels. Reduction in the cost and administrative burden to employers and stakeholder authorities. Responsive to industry and employer criticism on restrictive lists and the DAMA process.⁶

(Further discussion on the Regional Occupation Skills list is provide in Question 2 of this response submission.)

Recommendation 2

The MIA recommends that the use of the Regional Occupation List to determine regional occupations eligible for employer sponsorship or state and territory nomination be abandoned.

Recommendation 3

The MIA recommends that occupations eligible for regional employer sponsorship or state and territory nomination be all those classified as ANZSCO Skill levels 1 to 3.

² Adjust the English language level to overall IELTS 6 with no less than 4.5 in any component, rather than the current IELTS 6 in every component. Many migrants successfully live, work and operate businesses in Australia with some deficit in some components, especially where they have come to Australia as adults and are from non-English speaking countries. This current high level of English is a barrier to regional migration but those same migrants could have a pathway to settle in non-regional areas using the TSS visa.

Advantage: Greater incentive for potential migrants to consider regional migration. Broader pool of candidates for regional migration.

³ Reduce the formal skills assessments requirements to align with the occupations under the current TSS criteria. Skills assessments are required only for a very small number of occupations in the TSS stream. During the TSS visa process Home Affairs currently reviews the qualifications and work experience including references of the applicants and compare these to the skills level as reflected by the occupations ANZSCO description, without the need for a formal skills assessment. The same consideration should be afforded regional sponsoring employers. This will represent a significant cost saving for applicants with skills assessments in some cases costing thousands of dollars.

⁶ Department of Home Affairs, Migration Strategy, p 32. <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/programs-subsite/migration-strategy/Documents/migration-strategy.pdf>

A further consideration is that the ANZSCO is slow to be updated with new and emerging occupations. Where an occupation with its attendant skills requirements is not included in the ANZSCO, a skills assessment cannot be developed for the occupation. This has led to states, territories and some skills assessing authorities being forced to develop defacto skills assessment processes. The integrity of the program would still be maintained after these assessments were removed through labour market testing, genuine position requirements, compliance and monitoring.

Advantage: Reduce the number of applicants overall seeking skills assessments, in turn benefiting visa applicants across the whole skilled program by reducing administrative burden and processing times for assessments.

Recommendation 4

The MIA recommends that the requirement for formal skills assessment for Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional visas be aligned with those occupations requiring skills assessment in the current Temporary Skills Shortage subclass.

⁴ Increase the age threshold to below 50 years at time of application for SESR applicants. In conjunction with the abolition of the ROL, this increase in age would provide SESR holders, as the holders of five year visas, the ability to apply for permanent residency up to age 55 under the Skilled Regional Subclass 191 pathway. This would have a major impact on the composition of DAMAs and LAs (discussed further in the next section page x), while also would significantly increase the appeal of this visa.

Advantage: Provides a further incentive for regional applicants to choose the SESR as an option. Reduces administrative burden and cost of accessing a DAMA for age concessions.

Recommendation 5

The MIA recommends that the age threshold for the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional visa stream be increased to below 50 years at time of application.

⁵ Threshold work experience be aligned with the TSS visa for equity and to increase the pool of available applicants.

Advantage: increased access to this visa for migrants and increased candidate pool for regional migration.

Recommendation 6

The MIA recommends that the threshold work experience requirement for the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional visa stream be aligned with that of the current Temporary Skills Shortage subclass.

⁵ A regional reduction of 10% be applied to the TSMIT and used in conjunction with the local area Annual Market Salary Rate to determine salary levels. Providing the regional reduction would assist in reducing the number of occupations that require DAMAs and Labour Agreements inclusion. The local Annual Market Salary Rate would serve to protect the integrity of the skilled program, in association with current sponsorship obligations, monitoring and compliance requirements.

Given the extent of information available to verify local AMSR through Jobs and Skills Australia and other online sources, the MIA also recommends that the requirement for Regional Certifying Bodies (RCB) to certify AMSR be removed. MIA members report this process as costly for users, with the administrative requirements demanded by some certifying bodies far exceeding their remit in this process, duplicating Home Affairs processes and including requests for the private information of visa applicants, such as CVs and other personal details. This process creates real delays in the timely lodgement of regional applications. AMSR evidence for other visas have no such requirement, even where the jobs are located in regional areas. The RCB do not have the responsibility or indeed, the authority to assess visa applicants qualifications for the job, although this is in effect what they are doing.

Advantage: Reduction in the number of occupations requiring DAMA and LA inclusion. Reduction in the administrative burden and provide a level of financial relief to regional users.

Recommendation 7

The MIA recommends that a regional 10% reduction in the Temporary Skilled Migration Income Threshold be applied to the Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional visa subclass.

Recommendation 8

The MIA recommends that the requirement for certification of the local Annual Market Salary Rate by Regional Certifying Bodies be removed.

Previous reviews on regional migration programs have also identified the cost to smaller regional the Skilling Australian's Fund levy (SAF) and labour market testing requirements. It would appear that the collecting of the SAF is under review and new methods to collect the levy may address this issue. The

MIA recommends in any review of the levy that the relevant government departments, recognise the burden the levy imposes on smaller businesses generally, including the upfront collection and the lack of acceptable refund policies for the levy where the sponsored visa holder leaves that employment. This is of particular concern given the recent changes to Conditions 8107, 8607 and 8608⁷ that allow sponsored visa holder to work without a sponsorship for 180 days after leaving sponsored employment.

Recommendation 9

The MIA recommends that any review of the Skilling Australians Fund levy considers the burden this charge imposes on regional employers.

Recommendation 10

The MIA recommends that the refund policies associated with the Skilling Australians Fund levy be reviewed for procedural fairness to the business sponsors.

The requirement to undertake labour market testing for all regional locations should also be reconsidered. The practice is futile in many regional locations, particular in Category 3 outer ring regional and remote locations.

Recommendation 11

The MIA recommends that the labour market testing requirement be removed for Category 3 regional areas.

In total these changes would offer a more competitive choice between the TSS and SESR for prospective regional migrants and sponsoring employers. The cost to apply for the SESR would be reduced if a broader range of occupations was available for sponsorship, the requirement for skills assessments and RCB certification removed. This would afford users of the system financial relief and serve as an incentive to use the SESR. The Government might consider whether access to services such as domestic school fees⁸ and childcare rebates, in addition to Medicare and the clear permanent residency pathway would provide further incentive for migrants to consider this subclass.

⁷ Legislative Instrument, Migration Amendment (Work Related Visa Conditions) Regulations 2024.

⁸ Some states and territories provide some relief from international student schools fees but others do not.
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Rationalising Designated Area Migration Agreements and Labour Agreements

The DAMA and LA system was originally designed to support regional employment and development by providing flexible solutions to address regional labour shortages. However, over time these agreements have evolved to the extent that these now cover locations that could be better termed metropolitan and have grown exponentially in response to other broader issues within the migration program.

Regional DAMAs now include close to 2000 occupations in total.⁹ Ten of the twelve DAMAs have in excess of 100 approved occupations, with two having over 300 occupations. Regional concessions generally take four forms; the inclusion of 'off skills list' occupations; extension of the maximum age for permanent residency to 55 years; lowered English language thresholds; and concessions to the TSMIT. The integrity of these agreements, which can offer major deviations from the general skilled and employer sponsored programs, is maintained by strict annual allocation of visa places.

The MIA argues that modifications to other areas of the regional program would also improve the structure and efficiency of these agreements, thus reducing the administrative burden and cost to regional users.

Analysis of these DAMAs found that almost 80% of all included occupations fall within ANZSCO Skill level 1-3. Of these, up to 90% are approved in the DAMA with the age concession only, suggesting that this is the primary reason these occupations are incorporated.¹⁰ This is unsurprising given those ANZSCO skill levels contain the professional, managerial and higher education professions and are less likely to require salary or English level concessions.

If the revised SESR model (page 9) was implemented, with the broader use of ANZSCO skills levels and the increased age threshold, the necessity to include each of these occupations in the DAMAs would be reduced.¹¹

With these changes DAMAs and LAs would then only be necessary for occupations that were below the ANZSCO Skill level 3, new and emerging occupations not included in the ANZSCO or where English proficiency or other concessions were deemed appropriate. The cost to access DAMAs would be greatly reduced for employers if these changes were introduced, as would the administrative burden to both the employer and the DAMA owner.

A further issue highlighted by MIA members is the inconsistency between skills assessment requirements and DAMA requirements for work experience. For example, the requirements for a skills assessment can require three years' work experience, while the DAMAs will only require one year work experience. An applicant's occupation that may be at ANZSCO Skill Level 3 may require approval under a DAMA for an English language concession. Applicants with lower experience cannot

⁹ Common high demand occupations, such as medical practitioners and registered nurses are repeated across almost every DAMA to access age concessions.

¹⁰ Occupations below ANZSCO Skill Level 3, generally had multiple concessions approved across all DAMAs.

¹¹ Statistical analysis was conducted by the MIA using information provided on each of the DAMA public websites.

obtain the mandatory skills assessment for the SESR even though the occupation has been included in the DAMA on the basis of regional need. The MIA's suggestion to remove skills assessments for all but those assessed for TSS visas would assist in addressing this issue.

The MIA also supports recent indications from the federal Government that the state and territories governments will enter into state/territory DAMAs. A fundamental problem associated with the development of migration settlement strategies in Australia has been its federated model of government, whereby the Federal Government controls strategic migration decision making including the levels and composition of migrants settling in Australia, while regional infrastructure, urban planning and settlement is largely the remit of the state and territory governments, who bear the cost of this settlement, in the provision of essential services such as health care and schooling. The move for these state/territory wide DAMAs will provide much better opportunities for regional migration to become an integrated part of a whole of government regional development program.

Question 2

Should there be regional occupation lists? How should regional occupation lists work alongside the Core Skills List? What should be considered in compiling the regional occupation list?

As discussed in the previous section, the MIA recommends that the current Regional Occupation List (ROL) be abolished and a more flexible approach to determining occupations for regional migration be adopted.

It is the use of discrete ANZSCO six digit occupation codes to create skills lists that reduces the flexibility of these lists, making them less responsive to regional needs and contributing to the growth in DAMAs and LAs. Employers find these lists highly restrictive and costly, particularly when needing to resort to using DAMAs and LAs to be able to sponsor just a single worker.

The MIA's alternative approach of using ANZSCO skill levels 1-3 would reduce the need for extensive DAMAs and LAs. For jobs located in regional areas and for SESR and state/territory nominated visas, any occupation that falls within these skills level would be eligible to be employer sponsored or nominated.

Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) is currently reviewing the current skilled occupation list with the view to provide a new single consolidated Core Skills Occupation List (CSOL). Consultation on the new CSOL suggests that it will be a more concise list with most of the regional occupations highly likely to be removed from the list.¹²

In light of these moves the MIA has recommended that the use of regional skills lists built with ANZSCO six digit occupation descriptors be discontinued and a more flexible approach implemented.

¹²Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024, Draft Core Skills Occupation List (CSOL) for consultation <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/topics/migration-strategy/draft-core-skills-occupations-list-csol-consultation>
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Question 3

Could the definitions of regional be aligned across the various regional visas? How can definitions be structured to better account for the unique circumstances of regions?

As the discussion paper states, the definition of regional used for regional migration settings, broadly applies everywhere outside of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane; ie, it applies to ‘the rest of Australia’.

This broadbrush approach fails to accommodate the diverse characteristics and needs of the communities which fall within the definition. For example, the other capital cities, mid-size regional centres and small towns captured within the definition experience vast differences in terms of population size, amenities, services, resources, infrastructure and connectivity as well as key differences in opportunities and challenges. The current application of the definition within the migration system results in cities, mid-size centres and smaller towns and rural areas having to ‘compete’ with each other to attract migrants eligible to settle in regional areas.

Further, the absence of a common government policy definition of regional Australia exacerbates the challenge to define regional Australia for migration purposes. If the challenges facing regional Australia are to be fully addressed, there needs to be one whole of government definition of regional Australia.

The MIA recognises that a balance must be struck between providing a more tailored migration response which better addresses the diversity of regional areas across Australia while not adding further complication to the migration system. Assessment for the necessity for large metropolitan areas, such as the Gold Coast and Wollongong, which are in effect commuter centres, to be classified regional must be questioned and the breadth of the locations classified under the Category 1-3 designated areas should be examined further.

In this light, the MIA suggests that the government could consider offering concessions and incentives in a tiered approach which aligns with Category 2 and Category 3 of the Home Affairs’ regional definition. For instance, increased regional visa concessions or incentives could apply to Category 3 locations, such as a concession for labour market testing as noted earlier, which could help ‘level the competition’ between Category 2 and 3 communities in attracting migrants to settle in their communities.

Recommendation 12

The MIA recommends that the definition of regional area be aligned across all areas of Government to better meet the needs of these communities.

Recommendation 13

The MIA recommends that further concessions be available to the more remote areas of Australia currently defined as Category 3 locations.

Question 4

How can we reform Working Holiday Maker program visa settings to limit exploitation, while still ensuring regional Australia can access the workers it needs? For example, are there innovative strategies to incentivise Working Holiday Makers to choose regional Australia as their preferred destination, without tying the incentives to specified work visa requirements?

Originally designed as a cultural exchange program for young travellers that allowed them to supplement their travelling budgets with short term work, the Working Holiday Maker (WHM) program has also morphed into a government response to regional labour shortages. While the WHM program provides a flexible, albeit unstable, workforce to Australian regions, many working holiday makers (WHMs) do not take advantage of this work. Hence, governments have attempted to further induce WHMs to these areas to work with offers of second and third visas.

Some WHMs do not have an interest in undertaking specified regional work because of inherent features of this work. It can often be physically demanding, low skilled, low paid, geographically remote and the climatic conditions trying. In addition, exploitation of workers is widely known to have been endemic within this cohort, reported as being second only to that experienced by international students.¹³

Regional and rural Australia is heavily dependent on this transient workforce. The National Farmer's Federation has previously noted that 80% of the harvest labour force were WHMs.¹⁴ Home Affairs Working Holiday Maker Reports¹⁵ reveal that agricultural, forestry and fishing are the primary sectors where specified regional work is undertaken. However, this could also be influenced by these sectors being the amongst the first to approved for specific regional work and the approved sectors have been gradually expanding.

In December 2023, Working Holiday Subclass 417 visa holders reported that 49% had undertaken specific work in these sectors to be eligible for second WHM visas and 55% for third WHM visa. For Work and Holiday Subclass 462 visa holders the proportions were constant at 57% for both visas. Work in the agricultural, forestry and fishing sector far outweighed that of other specified work sectors.

From 1 July 2024, the number of WHMs undertaking regional work may be severely curtailed. WHMs from the United Kingdom will no longer be required to undertake specified work to be eligible for the

¹³ Coates B, Wiltshire T & Reysenbach T, 2023, Short-changed: how to stop the exploitation of migrant workers in Australia, Grattan, p 30 <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Short-changed-How-to-stop-the-exploitation-of-migrant-workers-in-Australia.pdf>; Berg L & Farbenblum B, 2017 *Wage Theft in Australia: Findings of the National Temporary Migrant Work Survey* <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/593f6d9fe4fcb5c458624206/t/62621ac87b2ee77d3206a2f1/1650596556282/Wage%2Btheft%2Bin%2BAustralia%2BReport+final+web.pdf>;

¹⁴ Rogers B & Young H, 2022, Submission - A Migration System for Australia's Future, National Farmers' Federation, p 8 <https://nff.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Submission-A-Migration-System-for-Australias-Future-2022.pdf> p 8

¹⁵ Department of Home Affairs, reports 2011-2023 available at <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/visa-statistics/visit>

further WHM visas under the Australia United Kingdom Free Trade Agreement (AUKFTA). This could potentially cause a 20 to 25% reduction in WHMs going to the regions.¹⁶

Encouraging a significant stream of WHM to undertake specific regional work, if that work component is decoupled from future visa eligibility, may be difficult in the wake of the AUKFTA change. The MIA suggests that a more successful incentive strategy lies in making the current WHM experience more positive, while still retaining the specified work requirements.

Recommendation 14

The MIA recommends that the Working Holiday Maker visa requirement to undertake specified regional work not be removed.

Tackling worker exploitation is a priority if WHMs are to have faith that the government will protect their personal safety and employment rights if they undertake this work. The introduction of specified work, as the means to obtain further visas exacerbated this exploitation by giving unscrupulous employers the means to do so.

The Migrant Workers taskforce reported that this exploitation included not only wage theft through underpayment and withholding pay, but also sexual assault, false job offers and confiscation of passports.

While more stringent evidentiary requirements were introduced in 2015,¹⁷ requiring appropriate pay records or payslips to be presented as evidence of specified work and for WHM employers to be registered with the Australian Taxation Office¹⁸ for lower payroll tax provisions, these do not prevent wider exploitation of the WHMs. In fact, the threat of withholding pay slips provides a further device for unscrupulous employers to use against WHMs.

Worryingly, Berg and Farbenblum reported that a large majority of these WHMs were aware that they were being exploited, but often accepted this as part of the process to obtain the documentary evidence that allowed them to apply for the second and third visas.¹⁹

¹⁶ WHM statistics demonstrate that UK WHMs have consistently represented between 20% and 25% of those obtaining further working holiday visas since 2021. Department of Home Affairs. Working Holiday Maker Visa Program Reports 2021, 2022, 2023 <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/visa-statistics/visit>

¹⁷ Fair Work Ombudsman, 2016, Inquiry into the wages and conditions of people working under the 417 Working Holiday Visa Program, p10

¹⁸ Fair Work Ombudsman website, How to tax a working holiday maker, <https://www.ato.gov.au/businesses-and-organisations/hiring-and-paying-your-workers/engaging-a-worker/in-detail/employers-of-working-holiday-makers#Registeredemployers>

¹⁹ Berg L & Farenblum B, 2017 *Wage Theft in Australia: Findings of the National Temporary Migrant Work Survey* https://static1.squarespace.com/static/593f6d9fe4fcb5c458624206/t/62621ac87b2ee77d3206a2f1/1650596556282/Wage%2Btheft%2Bin%2BAustralia%2BReport_final_web.pdf; Berg and Farbenblum are currently undertaking a follow up to this work, repeating the survey that formed the basis for the original Wage Theft study.

As a result of the Fair Work Ombudsman 2016 Working Holiday Visa Program Inquiry and its 2018 Harvest Trail Inquiry,²⁰ protections against exploitation of WHMs were introduced which included enhancing compliance through information, education and support for employers and WHMs. Regulatory compliance was also strengthened and eventually in 2021 piece rate payment for those undertaking horticultural work were outlawed.

However, the MIA notes that the Harvest Trail initiative was quietly retired in the most recent 2024-25 Federal Budget.²¹ Harvest Trail not only linked WHMs with regional employers, but importantly also provided a platform to deliver support services and information to protect WHMs.

Recent searches of the Fair Work Ombudsmen website found, that while information for migrants and some visa subclasses exists, it is difficult to find information that relates specifically to the WHM visa class or manner of working.²²

The MIA provides recommendations in this response to further enhance the protection of all WHMs and combat exploitation to assist in developing a more positive experience for regional WHMs.

Registration of employers and Working Holiday Makers' employment

The MIA supports the recommendation in the Discussion Paper that employers who wished to utilise WHMs should be required to register with the Home Affairs as a WHM employer.²³ Where the direct employer is using the services of a labour hire company to source or provide other services, the details of the external company and the business services being provided would also be recorded. This would provide an enhanced ability to monitor workplace compliance and protect WHMs.

This Working Holiday Maker Employer Register would be modelled on other Home Affairs employer sponsorship systems, with employers in these cases committing to meeting workplace terms and conditions under Australian employment legislation, including meeting award pay and conditions, and National Employment Standards where relevant, rather than entering into a formal sponsorship agreement.

It is envisaged that the system would be simple to use, low cost and with no reporting or other further administrative requirements. The employer would provide basic business information such as ABN and recent BAS to demonstrate that they are legally operating, location of the work, the products or service provided and the details of each WHM as employed.

The registration could be annual or for multiple years but should not be an onerous burden on employers. It is suggested that the same application fees charged to standard business sponsors, currently \$420 for a period of five years, be charged to the employer. For those employers that are

²⁰ Fair Work Ombudsman, 2016, Inquiry into the wages and conditions of people working under the 417 Working Holiday Visa Program, <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/sites/default/files/migration/763/417-visa-inquiry-report.pdf>, Fair Work Ombudsman, 2018, Harvest Trail Inquiry, <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/about-us/compliance-and-enforcement/inquiries/harvest-trail-inquiry>

²¹ Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2024, 2024-25 May Budget, <https://www.dewr.gov.au/about-department/corporate-reporting/budget/2024-25-budget>

²² Fair Work Ombudsman, website <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/> accessed 23 July 2024.

²³ Department of Home Affairs, 2024, Supporting strong and sustainable regions, p 12.

currently business sponsors under other programs, the registration charge could be nil, as these would already have had their business credentials assessed.

Home Affairs when processing second and third visas would be able to easily access data to verify WHMs specified work placements claims and also for data matching purposes with the ATO. The system could also be utilised for monitoring and compliance through the cross referencing of employer and labour hirers' payroll records to reduce episodes of exploitation using that route.

For WHMs there would be the security of knowing that oversight of their employment and completion of specified regional work placements existed. It is also suggested that those registered would become more attractive employers under this program. As a further safety measure WHMs could also register on the same system when they commence employment with a registered WHM employer.

Recommendation 15

The MIA recommends that the Department of Home Affairs implements an online Working Holiday Employer registration system to increase protection of Working Holiday Makers undertaking regional work.

Recommendation 16

The MIA recommends that both employers and labour hire companies using Working Holiday Makers visa holders be registered in this system.

This registration platform could also be utilised to provide employment resources and information to employers and contacts for relevant business services. Information for WHMs, in their own language, on Australian working standards and pay, and contact details for support services such as the Fair Work Ombudsman, could also be provided through that site.

As the Home Affairs ImmiAccount system already performs similar functions for employer sponsored visa programs and visa applications, the cost to implement this registration system would be comparatively low.

Recommendation 17

The MIA recommends that the Department of Home Affairs requires Working Holiday Makers to register when commencing work with a registered Working Holiday Maker employer,

Recommendation 18

The MIA recommends that the online registration portal for Working Holiday maker employers also provide access to information employers and Working Holiday Makers on Australian workplace rights and contacts for the Fair Work Ombudsman and other relevant support services.

Reduction in regional work Working Holiday Visa conditions

To obtain a second WHV holiday visa the applicant is required to undertake three months (88 days) of specified regional work while holding their first WHV. To be eligible for a third visa this period increases to six months of specified regional work while holding a second WHV.

Home Affairs statistics demonstrate a sharp drop off in the number of WHMs who move from second to third WHV, although a proportion of this may be attributed to the more recent introduction of the third visa and COVID border closures.²⁴ The MIA suggests that to some extent this may also be related to the length of time regional work needs to be undertaken to gain that third visa. To encourage WHMs to move to third visas, consideration should be given to reducing the specified regional work requirement from six months to three months as encouragement for WHMs to undertake a third regional work period.

Recommendation 19

The MIA recommends that the specified regional work criteria for third Working Holiday Visa eligibility be reduced from six months to three months.

Consideration could also be given to providing added incentives for WHMs that any work undertaken in Category 3 regional locations provide eligibility for second and third WHVs. This would assist all regional employers in these more remote areas.

Recommendation 20

The MIA recommends that any work undertaken in Category 3 regional locations be accepted for second and third Working Holiday Visa eligibility.

Visa application charge fee refund or nil fees

Another incentive for WHMs that could be considered is the refund of visa application charges (VAC) or nil VAC fees for subsequent WHM visas, where the applicant has undertaken specified regional work while holding their previous visa. Based on the number of 2023 second and third WHM grants,²⁵ this would equate to a cost of \$19.8 million for second WHM visas and \$3.3 million for third WHM visas. This cost would be offset to some extent by the registration fees from the regional employers.

²⁴ Department of Home Affairs. Working Holiday Maker Visa Program Reports 2021, 2022, 2023
<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/visa-statistics/visit>

²⁵ Department of Home Affairs. Working Holiday Maker Visa Program Reports, June and December 2023
<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/visa-statistics/visit>

Recommendation 21

The MIA recommends that the Department of Home Affairs refunds the visa application charge apply nil application charges for those Working Holiday maker applicants who have completed specified regional work and apply for subsequent second and third visas

Subsidised travel or travel vouchers

Travel to, from and between regional areas can be more costly than standard intercity travel in Australia. Subsidising travel for those WHMs who elect to undertake specified regional work may act as an added incentive for these visa holders to consider regional work or extending their range to more rural and remote areas than they might normally.

Similarly, rewarding those who have completed specified regional work with quantified value travel vouchers to be used during the validity of their visa may provide a welcome incentive to WHMs. The value of the vouchers could be based on time spent undertaking specified regional work and/or remoteness of the work undertaken.

Recommendation 22

The MIA recommends that Working Holiday Makers intending to undertake specified regional work be provided subsidised travel to and from regional locations.

Remove limitations to for regional work

While the incentive to undertake regional work is tied to specific regional work, WHMs can also be a valuable source of labour to regional employers. The MIA suggests other conditions attached to WHV could be adjusted to incentivise WHM to go to the regions and provide more stability to this workforce for both employers.

The MIA suggests that Condition 8547, which places the six month limitation on working for the same employer in the same location be removed for Category 2 and 3 regional locations to benefit regions and regional employers generally.

Recommendation 23

The MIA recommends that Condition 8547 be removed for those Working Holiday Makers who undertake regional work in Categories 2 and 3 locations.

Question 5

How can we ensure a more consistent approach to lower paid migration across various visa products, as well as reflect our commitment to maintain the primacy of our relationships with the Pacific?

The MIA believes that it is premature to provide more than a brief comment in this section related to lower paid visa products, given the Department of Home Affairs intends to further consult on the issue of the Essential Skill visa product and Jobs and Skills Australia are also undertaking the Food Supply Capacity Study, which will also include the role of migration in meeting workforce needs and prevention of exploitation.

Suffice to say, the MIA supports the protection of all working visa holders and especially those that may be more vulnerable such as lower paid workers, through the application of Australian industrial relations and employment law and Fair Work Australia protections for wages, conditions and to prevent worker exploitation.

Similarly, while comment on international relations in the Pacific is not within the remit of the MIA, it does support the PALM scheme as an exemplar for the protection of temporary labour force migrants. However, concerns as to the scalability of the features of that program must be raised. The high costs associated with this program, including employers providing accommodation that meets specific standards, cultural and pastoral care, access to churches and social activities, prevents smaller regional employers that could also benefit from this scheme from accessing it.

Question 6

Noting the limitations of visa settings, what factors encourage more migrants to choose to settle in the regions and improve retention?

Migrants' decisions to settle and remain in regional areas of Australia are influenced by a variety of factors that can be broadly categorised into economic, social and environmental factors:

- *Economic Opportunities* including the availability of suitable employment (including for spouses), cost of housing and living expenses.
- *Social cohesion* which can be facilitated by community support networks assisting with emotional and practical support; the availability and accessibility of essential services such as education, healthcare and childcare; the perceived quality of life including safety, and whether the migrant has existing family or other personal connections within the community.
- *Environmental factors* include preferences for less congestion and pollution, closer proximity to nature, favourable climate and attractive geographic features.

Government policy incentives and initiatives such as specific visa conditions that encourage or require migrants to live and work in regional areas providing pathways to permanent residency; language classes, orientation programs and employment services can also play a key role in attracting and retaining migrants in regional areas.

The Welcoming Cities initiative summarises the key factors of successful regional migrant settlement strategies as including:

- locally driven coordination, consultation, planning and budgeting
- meaningful consultation and a culture of welcome in receiving communities
- employment that matches demand with the characteristics of new migrants
- accessible housing, transport and culturally appropriate services
- where established ethnic communities and multicultural organisations are available, these serve to add extra value to the settlement experience²⁶.

The MIA also points to two examples of existing toolkits and measures that are designed to support the attraction to and retention of migrants in regional areas, which can be drawn upon when considering this issue.

The Regional Australia Institute's Toolkit for Rural and Regional Communities [Steps to Settlement Success](#) outlines seven building blocks for settlement success, comprising;

1. Initiating a settlement strategy
2. Organising and consulting local community
3. Welcoming and hosting new migrants,
4. Securing employment for new migrants,
5. Securing housing for new migrants,
6. Fostering community cohesion, and
7. Considering culture, customs and environment.

The toolkit is relevant for all stakeholders involved in welcoming and supporting migrants to regional areas including, government, local businesses, local volunteers and community groups and migrant settlement service organisations.

The second example is the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme where worker support and well-being is paramount to the scheme. Employers participating in the PALM scheme have an obligation to ensure their workers are supported, including through the provision of information about employee rights, finance, insurance and banking services and essential items in Australia such as SIM card, phones, clothing.

Parallels can be drawn from the PALM scheme about the types of supportive actions that can benefit migrants in establishing their new life and work in regional areas. However as previously mentioned, the MIA recognises that replicating the equivalent of the full employer required provisions under the PALM scheme on a scalable basis is challenging due to concerns about costs that would likely be prohibitive for small regional employers to meet.

The MIA also suggests that the Government could consider lessons from other successful initiatives for regional settlement such as the Canadian Provincial Nominees Scheme and Local Immigration Partnerships programs for macro level examples of settlement programs and at the micro level,

²⁶ https://welcomingcities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/WelcomingRegions_Summary.pdf

initiatives such as the Community Connections partnership between the Australian Pacific Islands Councils, the Salvation Army and Uniting Churches for PALM workers. The Community Connections program for example, is a Government funded program awarded through a tender process. However, regional settlement programs should not unduly burden churches, charities and Non-Government Organisations.

Question 7

Do provisional visas successfully encourage large scale retention of migrants in the regions? Is the length of a provisional visa the right length? Should both the regional employer sponsored visa and the regional nominated visa have the same provisional visa arrangements?

The primary objectives of regional visas are to reverse depopulation and to provide a labour force for regional employers. The accepted wisdom over time has been that migrants directed to regional areas for a few years, will settle and establish their lives in these areas.

However, academic evidence is increasingly calling this premise into question and there is a lack of longitudinal evidence to support this position. More recent studies are beginning to provide robust support to what has been anecdotally reported, that while provisional visas are successful in attracting migrants to regional areas, they do not successfully retain these migrants in the longer term.²⁷

In their 2024 working paper, Argent et al, examined the retention outcomes for eight regional visa classes and compared these to the Australian population. This study found significant and consistent relocation from regional areas to major cities by temporary and permanent regional skilled migrants. Relocation away from these areas was rapid in the first two years, then continued steadily over the next seven years. Only 40% of these migrants remained in regional areas after nine years. The low retention rate of this group was viewed as a product of their younger age and higher education profiles.²⁸

Boese and Moran found in multiple regional settlement studies that the reasons migrants relocate from regional areas remained constant. These were primarily lack of skilled employment opportunities, limited career pathways, blocked labour mobility and a factor not often noted, that many partners of skilled regional migrants are often required to sacrifice their careers to prioritise their family's welfare in the regions, while facing the same employment issues as the primary visa applicant.²⁹

²⁷ Argent N, Bernard A, Laukova D, Wilson T, Zajac T & Kimpton A, 2024 - Retaining permanent and temporary immigrants in rural Australia - place based and individual determinants – Preprint publication February 2024, Working Paper No 2-24/02, School of Environment, University of Queensland. p 3

²⁸ Argent N, Bernard A, Laukova D, Wilson T, Zajac T & Kimpton A, 2024 - Retaining permanent and temporary immigrants in rural Australia - place based and individual determinants – Preprint publication February 2024, Working Paper No 2-24/02, School of Environment, University of Queensland. p 14

²⁹ Argent N, Bernard A, Laukova D, Wilson T, Zajac T & Kimpton A, 2024 - Retaining permanent and temporary immigrants in rural Australia - place based and individual determinants – Preprint publication February 2024, Working Paper No 2-24/02, School of Environment, University of Queensland. p 9

Nevertheless, provisional visas play an important role in encouraging migrants to live and work in regional areas. The benefit to the community can be immediate even if the migrant isn't retained long-term. Provisional Visa holders are often fulfilling critical roles for regional community, such as being general practitioners working at the local medical practice.

The MIA notes that for the third part of this question, without clear explanation as to which stream of the regional nominated visa, state/territory or family sponsored visa relates to or what the term 'visa arrangements' encompasses, it is difficult to make any recommendations in relation to that section of the question.

However, as a general observation, the MIA would contend that these two visas have different foci. The employer sponsored visa is designed for employers to fill immediate, specific positions within their businesses. The nominated state/territory program displays a more human capital element. The visa holder is not required to demonstrate that their regional employment will accord with their skills and experience. These differences are more likely to be beneficial to the regional migration program than not, by providing a mix of skills and talents that may be utilised in different ways by each cohort.

The MIA suggests that examining the reasons these migrants leave regional areas would be a more fruitful area of investigation. Indeed, the Government's own State of Australia's Regions report recognises that 'sufficient infrastructure, employment opportunities, available and affordable housing, and access to services' are the important determinants in encouraging migrants to settle and remain in regional areas, just as it is for other Australians.³⁰

Larger, more prosperous regions and regional cities may be able to provide the conditions that retain regional migrants, however for other regions this is not the case. This will remain a problem for retention until infrastructure and other essential services can reach the level where these can offer similar opportunities to regional migrants.

Rather than changing the current regional provisional visa arrangements the MIA would prefer to see more incentives than compulsion to remain in regional areas. More resources should be devoted to regional programs that support the integration and settlement for regional migrants in these areas, to encourage them to want to remain in these areas.

MIA Recommendation 24

MIA recommends that the current provisional visa setting not be changed at this time

MIA Recommendation 25

MIA recommends that further resources be devoted to local settlement and integration programs for regional migrants.

³⁰ Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts 2024, State of Australia's Regions 2024. p 20 <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/department/media/publications/state-australias-regions-2024>

Question 8

How can we improve planning for regional migration, especially given the return of migrants to regional Australia post-pandemic? Should there be more flexibility provided to states and territories in planning for regional migration?

The MIA recommends that the principles underpinning regional migration should include; simplicity, accessibility and responsiveness. These principles are critical to meeting the needs of regional areas including where employment growth opportunities warrant a response which maximises the economic opportunities that arise.

The MIA recognises that regional migration is one measure amongst existing government activity designed to support and bolster regional Australia. The MIA notes the various Australian government initiatives for coordination, communication and support in regional Australia such as; the Regional Investment Framework, the State of Australia's Regions report, the Regional Development Australia committees and various other regional and community programs.

Planning, both in terms of meeting the needs of communities and supporting the settlement and retention of migrants in regional areas, needs to be undertaken in a holistic manner with, not in isolation from, the various initiatives outlined above. Developing effective strategies to attract and retain migrants in regional areas would ideally be considered within the context of a national population planning and infrastructure strategy.

Planning also needs to be facilitated with regional communities taking part and the MIA encourages the use of Regional Australia Institute's Toolkit for Rural and Regional Communities [Steps to Settlement Success](#).

The involvement of state and territories is important to the success of regional migration given their responsibilities in meeting communities needs through the provision of essential services and infrastructure. However, this needs to be facilitated in such a way that allows for a responsive approach which empowers local communities to have their needs heard and fed into the planning process.

The MIA suggests that a framework be developed for settlement services for new regional migrants with the objective of retaining migrants in regional areas. This framework should be designed to allow flexibility for a broad range of settlement circumstances and should incorporate stakeholders across all levels of government, service providers and community representatives and should be sufficiently resourced to support the success of the regional migration settlement visa program. Longitudinal assessment by governments on the success of these programs is also encouraged to inform future regional migration policy.

Recommendation 26

The MIA recommends that a regional settlement services framework be developed to inform the design of regional settlement and retention strategies.

Recommendation 27

The MIA recommends that stakeholders across all levels of government, service providers and community representatives have input into the development of the regional settlement services framework.

Recommendation 28

The MIA recommends that sufficient funding is provided to dedicated volunteer and community organisations providing settlement services to regional migrants.