



Building a Stronger Pacific Family: reforming the PALM scheme – Consultation Summary

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of consultations

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme is Australia's primary temporary migration program for PALM scheme employers to recruit workers from nine Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste to fill unskilled, low, and semi-skilled positions where there are not enough local workers available. It is an uncapped, demand-driven program, where seasonal and long-term workers can be employed in any sector across regional and rural Australia and in agriculture nationally.

The Australian Government has committed to strengthening Australia's Pacific partnerships by delivering a comprehensive package of reforms to improve and expand the PALM scheme. Consultations were designed to ensure that the proposed PALM scheme policies were informed by the practical experiences of those who value, engage with, and participate in the scheme to maximise benefits for workers, Pacific partners, industry, and the Australian community.

1.2 Consultation process

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), in partnership with the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), commenced initial discussions with PALM scheme stakeholders in June 2022, with formal consultations taking place from 1 September to 4 November 2022. Nineteen written submissions were received, and 54 consultation meetings were convened (in person and virtual) to hear views of stakeholders from across Australia. This included meetings in Brisbane, Melbourne and Tasmania and townhall sessions with workers in Gatton, Queensland; Altona Meadows, Victoria; and Devenport and Longford, Tasmania. One-on-one and roundtable sessions were held with Pacific Heads of Mission (HoMs) and a Pacific Workshop was held in Fiji with governments of PALM-scheme participating countries.


Reforms were also discussed at four PALM scheme committee meetings. Feedback was received from industry, employers, PALM scheme workers, unions, community and diaspora groups, state, territory and local governments, and Pacific and Timor-Leste governments.

2. Key reforms

2.1 Family accompaniment

While there was support for workers bringing their families to Australia including from PALM scheme workers due to the number of benefits of the proposal related to worker productivity, wellbeing and education and employment opportunities for family members, a number of concerns were also raised. These related to the welfare impact on children, decreased remittances, potential for additional 'brain drain', employers' obligations to families, cost of living pressures, and access to services and supports.

There was a strong emphasis on the need to support families to **prepare for, settle into Australia and re-integrate back into their home country** at the end of their deployments. A particular concern was the



welfare impact on children following reintegration after living in Australia for a number of years and the disruptions to education particularly where they were part-way through a school year.

The need for clarity on the **policy intent** of the scheme was raised by stakeholders who envisaged challenges reintegrating families back into home communities because there is no pathway to permanent residency.

Family accompaniment would also mean workers may **remit** less back to their home country, undermining a key reason for Pacific Governments' and workers' participation in the PALM scheme. While Pacific countries acknowledged the benefits of family accompaniment to the worker and family wellbeing, concerns about the potential for 'brain drain' and the impact of loss of families from communities, were also raised. For example, the impact on children dislocated from their communities and older generations left behind.

Strong views were expressed on the **eligibility criteria** for workers to participate. Criteria such as a minimum of six to 12 months employment in Australia prior to the arrival of their family and having a demonstrated savings record and financial capacity to establish a family life in Australia were suggested. Stakeholders also supported the idea of staging implementation of the policy to determine appropriate settings.

'[T]hat family accompaniment has the potential to foster deeper connections with our Pacific family – this objective is important and therefore, carefully considered implementation of this commitment is critical.' – Australian Fresh Produce Alliance (AFPA)

Concerns were expressed that employers may have welfare **obligations to families** which was seen to create a disparity with the support provided to local employees and would particularly burden smaller businesses.

PALM scheme employers generally supported the **employment of spouses** in their businesses, and some workers were aware spouses may need to work to adequately support their family due to cost-of-living pressures. In particular, the aged care and meat processing sectors noted there were opportunities to employ spouses in a range of roles with workforce shortages.


Overstretched infrastructure, the high **cost of living** in Australia and need for appropriate, affordable and quality **accommodation** for families was a concern for most stakeholders, especially in rural and regional locations. While not within the scope of the PALM scheme, stakeholders noted the importance of better regulation of and investment in high-quality housing by government or industry and noted the need for high quality accommodation close to public transport. Some stakeholders called for relocation support.

The importance of access to schools with relevant supports for Pacific students and waiving international student fees for school-aged children was also raised (*N.B. dependants of 403 visa holders are currently exempt from international student fees in most jurisdictions*). Access to subsidised childcare was also raised, along with concerns that **medical costs** remain high and health insurance had high upfront costs and would not cover pregnancy, birthing services and unforeseen events.

2.2 Relocation of the Australian Agriculture Visa (AAV) into the PALM scheme

While several risks were raised, strong support for worker portability was evident from the agriculture sector to ensure workers have sufficient work and employers have access to a sufficient number of workers to account for differing seasonal crop harvesting.

Agriculture stakeholders sought to commence any new portability arrangements with **employer-initiated portability**, initially with short-term PALM scheme workers, to better understand key challenges before potentially transitioning to a **Marketplace Model**, which will also include worker-initiated portability.



Agriculture stakeholders noted that commencing with employer-initiated portability should not delay development of the Marketplace Model, which some stakeholders viewed as important for smaller growers and those with shorter seasons to be able to access the PALM scheme as direct employers. The meat processing and care sectors did not express a need for portability as they could provide ongoing full-time employment to their workers and need a more stable longer-term workforce.

There was limited support for the possibility of short-term secondments to non-approved employers to maintain worker welfare and the integrity of the PALM scheme.

There was broad support for a **Trusted Trader concept** to be introduced with some form of **accreditation** of PALM scheme employers. However, there were divergent views on whether third-party accreditation should be used. A model similar to a Trusted Trader concept was expected by some to deliver benefits such as more flexibility to move workers, faster processing times (a priority status) for employers, better support, reduced administrative requirements, and the ability to have a greater say on policies which affect them. Union representatives held the view firmly that third party accreditation schemes were not sufficiently rigorous to convey necessary protections for workers under the scheme and PALM scheme integrity checks should be maintained.

There was support from some PALM scheme employers and industry representatives to **expand postcode eligibility to agriculture-linked industries** in urban areas. The care, accommodation, hospitality, and tourism sectors also expressed support for expanding geographic coverage to open the PALM scheme to these industries in urban areas. It was acknowledged this would need to be approached cautiously to ensure labour shortages were genuine and worker welfare was maintained, including in urban areas where there were thought to be more potential distractions for workers.

2.3 Reducing the burden of upfront travel costs

There was support from most employers for the proposed underwriting mechanism to recover the cost of flights, as opposed to recoupment through an increase to the tax rate or superannuation system, with PALM scheme employers remaining responsible for travel arrangements.


‘This initiative would significantly reduce a significant financial risk associated with participation in the program, thereby making short term deployments more attractive to employers.’ – AFPA

‘AUSVEG is supportive of the government reducing upfront costs to increase participation in the PALM scheme [and] is aware of the considerable financial and administrative challenges if the government recouped the flight costs through a tax or superannuation system.’ – AUSVEG

However, the National Farmers’ Federation (NFF) held the view that the underwriting proposal would not address obstacles to joining the scheme, particularly for smaller growers.

‘While the underwriting proposal will be very helpful to AEs who are already familiar with the program’s requirements— and have established the systems and tools to manage it and its idiosyncrasies —it will not meaningfully lower the barriers to entry (i.e. for smaller growers) which was one of the biggest attractions of Labor’s commitment.’ – NFF

Stakeholders emphasised that it was important for the Government to develop strong eligibility criteria, including when PALM scheme workers **disengage**, are unable to board their flight for unforeseen reasons or do not complete their placement prior to repaying their travel costs, and that it would be important to establish that there was no fault on the part of employers. It was noted the Government should exercise discretion if welfare issues have contributed to worker disengagement.



There were also suggestions that a wider range of upfront costs should be covered by the policy and that the policy be extended to long-term workers. Suggestions on alternative methods to make the PALM scheme more attractive to small growers were also brought forward.

3. Key themes by cohort

While family accompaniment was a key theme for all stakeholder cohorts, the **Australian National University's** (ANU) focus was on the policy intent of the PALM scheme and whether it was a pathway to permanent residency, the potential for 'brain drain', educational opportunities for families and the program design. Other key themes, discussed by academics, were worker portability, the Trusted Trader concept, industry accreditation schemes, worker disengagement, pre-departure briefings and reducing red tape.

Community and diaspora groups focused on the program design and policy settings for family accompaniment especially relating to accommodation, healthcare, infrastructure and the settlement and reintegration of workers. Other key themes were worker portability, expanding the PALM scheme to urban areas, pre-departure briefings, reintegration of workers on their return home and red tape.

PALM scheme employers and industry representatives demonstrated a particular interest in the reduction of upfront travel costs and the program design and policy intent of family accompaniment, speaking to cost of living, accommodation, employer obligations and employing spouses. Worker portability, the Trusted Trader concept, industry accreditation schemes, broadening the definition of agriculture, upfront travel costs, brain drain, upskilling, training and ongoing support for workers and red tape also featured.

Key themes arising from consultation with **state and territory governments** included the employment of spouses and infrastructure required for family accompaniment, worker portability, expanding the definition of agriculture and the training and development for workers. **Local government** focused on accommodation and family accompaniment, cultural education and ongoing support for workers.

Pacific and Timor-Leste Governments, including Labour Sending Units (LSUs) and HOMs, also covered all aspects of family accompaniment in their feedback, in addition to worker portability, expanding the definition of agriculture, upfront travel costs, brain drain, worker disengagement, pre-departure briefings, training and ongoing support for workers including reintegration on their return home and red tape.

Key themes arising in consultations with **workers** were family accompaniment including access to healthcare and other supports, feedback on pre-departure briefings and access to development and training.

Union feedback focussed on accommodation and healthcare arrangements for family accompaniment, along with worker portability, third party accreditation, expanding the definition of agriculture, upfront travel costs, training and development for workers, red tape and protecting workers' rights.

4. Next Steps

The feedback gathered during the consultation period will inform future arrangements and policy settings for Pacific labour mobility and support the continued growth and expansion of the program. Some additional detail related to these policies was announced with the budget on 25 October 2022, informed by the stakeholder consultations. Further information on these reforms is available on: www.palmscheme.gov.au.

Attachment A: Consultation Key Feedback

1. Family Accompaniment

Although there were many acknowledged benefits of family accompaniment, stakeholders were conscious of risks, potential mitigation strategies and the need for clarity.

Many PALM scheme workers expressed strong support for family accompaniment during consultations and the opportunities a longer stay would provide their partners and children. Some workers acknowledged the additional costs and challenges of bringing a family to Australia and considered the current arrangement – having the family at home – may be better.

Stakeholders, particularly from the care sector and Pacific Governments, noted the benefits of family accompaniment to worker productivity and wellbeing, continuity of family units, opportunities for family members in terms of education and employment, and a reduced risk of worker disengagement. Industry also noted new set of pressures that family members could encounter with changes to living arrangements, social and family networks.

Pacific countries and Timor-Leste expressed diverse views on the family accompaniment policy and noted that expectations – especially of workers and their families – will need to be carefully managed. Many Pacific countries favoured the policy on the basis that extended family separation is a key driver of social issues. Others expressed concern about the impacts of whole families relocating to Australia, noting that alternative measures (e.g., reunion fares for workers) could serve similar objectives with lesser impact on Pacific countries and communities.

'The increasing length of PALM scheme placements, including for low-skilled work such as harvesting, increases the risks of social harm to workers and their families due to prolonged separation. - Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania; the Pacific Islands Council of Queensland (PICQ); the Pacific Islands Council of South Australia (PICSA); New South Wales Council for Pacific Communities

Industry stakeholders raised the importance of workers fully understanding the costs and requirements of family accompaniment. These would include reduced savings to remit home, balanced against other benefits of settlement in Australia such as access to Australian schools and employment opportunities. Some employers were also concerned that the requirement for employer sponsorship could create difficulties for them as worker expectations were high.

Some stakeholders described family accompaniment as incompatible with the original purpose of the PALM scheme and a key reason for Pacific government participation (to provide remittances to families and communities including to encourage the development of small businesses). Pacific Governments raised concerns about reduced remittances while others noted the benefits to the family would outweigh the cost.

The need for clarity on the policy intent of the scheme was raised by stakeholders from Pacific HoMs, industry, PALM scheme employers, and the ANU– particularly for workers. For example, whether family accompaniment was intended as a pathway to permanent residency. There was also concern that making it more attractive to stay in Australia could lead to 'brain drain' for the Pacific. There were also comments that the Pacific Engagement Visa may be a better option for family accompaniment.

The ANU proposed the scheme must have an overarching vision and begin by acknowledging the harm of family separation, and that the requirement for employer sponsorship should be phased out over time.

'Family accompaniment policy development should begin with a statement of principles, emphasising the harm of mandated family separation, and recognising that the principal decision maker regarding family accompaniment should be the family concerned.' – ANU

Industry stakeholders raised concerns about the program's intent being undermined, for example, if a secondary visa holder had unlimited working rights and earned more than the worker, leading to the worker disengaging from the PALM scheme. Views were mixed across sectors on whether a spouse accompanying a worker would boost or reduce productivity.

1.1 Employer obligations

During consultations there were mixed views on the obligations employers should have to accompanying family members. The benefits for the wellbeing of long-term workers were acknowledged, and some employers saw opportunities in being able to provide job opportunities for dependents (secondary visa holders). Employers were generally concerned that if their welfare responsibilities extended to dependents, it would require significant additional investment which would burden smaller businesses; lead to disparities in support provided to local employees; and discourage employers from participating.

Stakeholders from the agriculture and care sectors did not support additional responsibilities being placed on PALM scheme employers. A large employer in the care sector was of the view that the costs of mobilising family members should be borne by workers – either upfront, or through deductions – which could place the family under financial stress and limit capacity to provide remittances.

Meanwhile LSUs suggested PALM scheme employers could provide support for family accompaniment including through a minimum salary to support a family and accommodation support.

To mitigate risks, suggestions from industry included government funding to improve the welfare support available to workers from more suitable experienced support services, as the experience of some PALM scheme employers is that workers are reliant heavily on their employers, including for support and advice.

1.2 Secondary visa holders


Overall, there was general enthusiasm across all sectors for PALM scheme employers employing spouses of PALM scheme workers, although limited English language skills were a noted potential barrier. Stakeholders shared that some workers are aware it may be necessary for their spouse to work to adequately support their family in Australia due to cost-of-living pressures.

Employers noted the value of spouses holding employable skill sets, and that it is possible to organise rosters to accommodate family commitments if both spouses work with the same AE, particularly in the care and meat processing sectors. They also acknowledged the potential for additional brain drain if a spouse was a skilled worker.

While some employers suggested spouses working for an employer outside the PALM scheme could assist with integration into the community and provide flexibility, they also acknowledged this could increase the risk of exploitation and make employer obligations towards the family more complicated.

1.3 Cost of living

Pacific governments, industry and workers expressed concerns about the high cost of living in Australia, on top of high upfront costs. Workers consulted in Tasmania were split on the benefits of bringing their family to Australia due to the high cost of living, although also saw financial benefits from not having to maintain



two households. Industry and PALM scheme employers commented that cost of living pressures must be well communicated so families can make an informed decision about whether family accompaniment is the right choice for them. LSUs requested the government prepare advice on the average costs for specific family units. Industry also raised the negative impact these pressures could have on families.

'[T]he cost of living in Australia will have [a] significant impact on remittances and may undermine the benefit to the workers and ultimately the sending nations.' – NFF

1.4 Accommodation

All stakeholder groups raised concerns with the lack of affordable and suitable accommodation for families in regional areas. They also noted the importance of better regulation of and investment in high-quality housing to ensure workers are treated with respect, feel welcome and are productive, with housing available close to public transport particularly for workers who do not drive. Community and diaspora groups queried whether there would be funding for dedicated housing and workers enquired if they would receive relocation support.

Participating governments raised concern about the quality of employer-provided accommodation, discrepancies between accommodation descriptions and actual accommodation provided, and the difficulties long-term workers face to relocate to private rentals due to the need to raise a bond and furnish the accommodation. Improvements were suggested including requiring employers to provide purpose-built accommodation, regular assurance activities, an improved complaints handling process and increased transparency around accommodation that will be provided.


1.5 Education

Industry stakeholders called for fee-free schooling and consistency in access to subsidised education and childcare and queried if PALM workers and families would have access to fee-free TAFE places. Industry also acknowledged that some regions may not have suitable services such as schools with English language support. Similarly, LSUs suggested families be placed in peri-urban areas where schools would more likely have additional support available for international students. The Northern Territory Government noted the significant burden on communities' education systems and social services and that education standards in regional areas are already stretched to capacity. They also noted the policy has the risk of putting regional communities 'further behind in closing the education gap'.

The care and horticulture sectors remarked that the high cost of childcare and a potential childcare subsidy would need to be considered particularly for families where spouses are required to work in rosters. The ANU noted that workers may make their own informal plans through shift work and community arrangements.

1.6 Healthcare

Industry, community, diaspora, and union stakeholders also expressed concerns about strain on health services in regional areas, the complexity of Australia's health system for workers, and high medical costs not always covered by private health insurance. These stakeholders advocated for access to Medicare, noting that workers contribute to the Australian economy, including through tax revenue. Issues were envisaged. In addition to this, stakeholders foresaw issues with affordability and suitability of health insurance given that more serious health issues and pregnancy are often not covered, at least in the first 12 months. Unions reported that many workers are avoiding seeking treatment due to the complexity, high



upfront costs, and lack of providers in regional areas, along with difficulties accessing transportation. PALM scheme workers asked if there would be healthcare benefits for workers with a child with a disability.

1.7 Infrastructure

Community and diaspora groups predicted families could experience difficulties due to a lack of resources and facilities, including access to affordable transport. Industry and local government raised concerns about the impact of family accompaniment on overstretched infrastructure and services in regional communities while also noting its potential benefit to sustainable regional economies.

‘The support of family accompaniment is critical to long term stability of families and work force sustainability and promoting the opportunity to grow regional and local community populations.’ – Southern Downs Regional Council (SDRC)

State and territory governments recognised that efficient collaboration, forward planning and information-sharing with the federal government is needed to manage pressures on infrastructure, housing, and services.

The NT Government noted that the reality of regional housing, transport and service provision would need to be considered in determining viability, in addition to the capacity of Australia’s community support mechanisms.

1.8 Family settlement in Australia and reintegration on return home

By enabling workers to bring their family to Australia, the policy is encouraging them to settle into their community for a number of years prior to returning and reintegrating into their home communities. For this reason, there were suggestions from the ANU and industry that family accompaniment must include a pathway to permanent residency.

‘[T]he Government must also consider the repercussions of allowing a family to settle in Australia for multiple years without an appropriate pathway to permanent residency and, beyond this, the implications of offering a pathway to permanent residency from the perspective of Pacific and Timor-Leste governments.’ – AFPA

Some Pacific governments emphasised the need for a national policy approach to determine whether family accompaniment was a policy they wished to engage with. They also noted the need to support families prior to, during and following travel to Australia, including by providing pre-departure and on-arrival briefings that extend to family members covering life in Australia, accessing social services, adapting to a new environment and other relevant training. LSUs also saw value in financial planning sessions to help workers make informed choices with their family.

Industry and community organisations highlighted the importance of having accessible faith-based organisations, including connections with local Pacific churches, to assist families to settle in communities and navigate education, health, and other services. It was also noted by community and diaspora groups and the care sector that the PALM scheme will need to be prepared to respond to domestic violence issues and that churches will be invaluable in supporting this.

Stakeholders from all sectors, and from the Pacific, emphasised the importance of providing community and diaspora connections for workers. Community integration should commence prior to worker arrival in Australia, and the local community should have cultural awareness and culturally appropriate services. Similarly, community and diaspora groups suggested workers should have training on Australian culture in the early days. Another suggestion made by community and diaspora groups was to graduate some long-



term workers to a visa where they could stay in Australia longer to become part of the Pacific diaspora and support new PALM scheme workers settle into the community.

Difficulty for families to make connections and feeling isolated was raised as a concern on several occasions – including for spouses if they do not find employment, and for children settling into school particularly if they speak little English or have come from remote villages. Further to this, connections families may have made in Australia would be disrupted when families return home, a welfare concern particularly for children. It was noted that there would be disconnection from their culture for some time, and then they would be required to reintegrate. Industry suggested support for returning families to reintegrate into the Pacific.

1.9 Program Design

Most stakeholders were supportive of a flexible and staged approach to family accompaniment. This could commence with a selective ‘opt-in’ pilot in suitable locations consisting of a small group of interested and experienced PALM scheme employers. It was suggested that a first round of families could be strategically selected to provide ‘seeding support’ to future families. SDRC and Northern Tasmania were open to being pilot regions, and the Tasmanian Government suggested the Launceston area.

The Fijian Government recommended that criteria to be well defined, with further consultation required across the areas discussed above before rolling out the initiative. While most stakeholders were supportive of a proposed requirement for workers to be in Australia for six to twelve months prior to their family arriving, the ANU and stakeholders from the care sector noted there was no such requirement for other migrant workers and their families, and that this could be perceived as discriminatory. An alternative suggestion was for workers to provide evidence of their ability to save (such as a robust financial plan) or evidence of skills development in Australia, such as a Certificate II or III.

Other criteria suggested were language requirements, prior experience in Australia and strong work performance, sufficient income, support networks, access to personal transportation, education, housing and medical services.

Workers queried if families could visit Australia prior to making the commitment to relocate, while Pacific governments suggested the option of multiple entry visas so families would not be required to settle in Australia but could visit regularly. LSUs noted participating countries should be able to determine how they engage with family accompaniment such as by setting a cap on the number of families that can participate.

‘There is a need to ensure that arrangements that will be made for the family will be sufficient for their situation to be financially viable.’ - Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of VIC and TAS; PICQ; PICSA; NSW Council for Pacific Communities

However, it was also strongly recommended by the ANU that in the longer term, PALM scheme employers should not have a veto to prevent families from coming to Australia unless there is an exceptionally good reason. Bringing their family to Australia should be a worker’s informed choice.

Other recommendations for the program design included:

- settling multiple families in the same area to provide mutual support
- skills development and English language tuition for spouses and dependants
- supporting workers to go home more frequently if they are unable to bring their family to Australia, especially those here beyond two years and on a minimum wage

- policy supports available for families if workers commit domestic violence, including providing families the option to remain in Australia for the originally intended length of stay if financially viable
- clear policy on what happens to a family when a worker is dismissed, or a relationship breaks down.

Overall, industry and PALM scheme employers sought clarity on where the responsibility for healthcare, education, housing and welfare of families would sit.

2. Relocation of the AAV under the PALM scheme

2.1 Worker portability

Strong support for worker portability was evident across stakeholder groups during consultations given that this reform would help ensure workers have sufficient work and do not seek to disengage. It would also provide employers with improved flexibility to account for differing seasonal crop harvesting. Industry provided evidence of past positive feedback from workers on portability involving variation of location, work and personnel, tempered by accommodation, welfare, and transport issues. It was noted that lessons could be learned from the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) regional pilot that was conducted pre-COVID, but which had limited uptake due to COVID and border closures – in particular that growers may need some assistance to work together to take advantage of portability arrangements.

Comments were provided on both employer-initiated portability, where employers organise the movement of workers between PALM scheme employers, and worker-initiated portability, also referred to as the Marketplace Model, where workers are free to initiate their own movements between PALM scheme employers. The agricultural sector was supportive of commencing with employer-initiated portability while the meat processing and care sectors did not express a need for it as they could provide ongoing full-time employment to their workers. PALM scheme employers in these sectors may also invest in certificate level qualifications, requiring longevity of placements. Unions were supportive of worker-initiated portability noting that it would allow workers to seek out better conditions, with the potential to drive overall improvements in the behaviours of employers.

Community and diaspora groups also raised several risks associated with the proposal such as workers taking advantage of the settings or PALM scheme employers not fulfilling their responsibilities. In addition to comments on flexibility of movement, LSUs commented on the need for workers to be given advance notice of any move and to ensure workers have the personal and physical capacity required to complete the work for the new employer. There were also stakeholders from industry who suggested transfer should be pre-arranged offshore prior to the worker's departure.

Agriculture sector stakeholders commented that while portability would enable workers to be more autonomous and agile, it could also require that employer obligations are lowered and may conflict with the PALM scheme's accommodation, sponsorship, and welfare arrangements, as well as broader development objectives. There was scepticism that the PALM scheme would be able to accommodate some of the agriculture sector's needs related to flexibility.

Agriculture sector stakeholders also highlighted the contradiction between the requirement to provide employment with a minimum of 30 hours per week to seasonal workers – with seasonal conditions and inclement weather – a disincentive for growers to take up the PALM scheme.

If portability was introduced, the meat processing sector's preference was for placements of a minimum length of six months while the horticultural sector noted the need for more flexibility and shorter placements.

There were concerns across all stakeholder groups that involving non-approved PALM employers in portability arrangements, including unplanned secondments, would undermine the scheme's integrity and increase worker welfare risks. If it were to occur, there would need to be another form of approval or accreditation or very high compliance requirements. Some stakeholders indicated that a secondary employer should not have to be a PALM scheme employer if the original PALM scheme employer retained its welfare obligations to the worker.

'All employers should be PALM AEs – secondments to host farms is manageable but under the responsibility of an approved AE and approved sponsor. There [must] be a clear risk management and compliance approach taken for secondments to host employers who are not AEs.' – Approved Employers of Australia (AEA)

'Key to integrating improved portability within the PALM scheme is to maintain high standards for AEs, and high standards and expectations for worker welfare.' – AFPA

2.1.1 Employer-initiated portability

There was a preference, particularly from the agricultural sector, to commence with employer-initiated portability with short-term workers to better understand key challenges before transitioning to a Marketplace Model, along with cost sharing arrangements, commercial agreements, administration, and any potential impact on worker welfare. While seeking flexibility, it was also suggested that worker transfers should only be allowed where there is a contract for service and both employers are supportive of the move. LSUs and academics proposed multiple employer arrangements could help address concerns of insufficient work for a worker. New Zealand's joint "approval to recruit" model was suggested as an example. Unions and Pacific stakeholders noted it would be important that employers pay the cost of transport associated with workers moving between PALM scheme employers.


'Movement between businesses must be left to the growers to arrange and not to workers. Leaving it up to the employers will uphold the welfare standards and ensure protections travel with workers as they move between approved employers.'
– AUSVEG

2.1.2 Marketplace Model

Agriculture stakeholders noted that commencing with employer-initiated portability should not delay development of the Marketplace Model, which they view as important for smaller growers to be able to access the PALM scheme, and to help reduce disengagement that results from insufficient hours. Workers could 'follow' the work and better conditions. However, they also noted this would require a high level of experience, knowledge and sophistication that current PALM arrangements do not require.

'True portability would allow workers the opportunity to 'follow' the work. They would have the power and responsibility which currently resides with the employer.' – NFF

Union stakeholders also supported free movement of workers after they have paid off upfront costs and noted that genuine portability was required for PALM to be a best practice labour mobility program. The introduction of elements common to efficient marketplaces could also improve the allocation of labour, while maintaining the integrity of the program. Some industry and state and territory government



representatives suggested providing workers a list of short-term options or a pool of employers for submitting expressions of interest.

There were mixed views on worker-initiated portability as some stakeholders thought transfers should remain at the discretion of the PALM scheme employer who has invested in recruiting and onboarding and taken the risk of investment in upfront travel costs. Not allowing the PALM scheme employer to control movements could have unintended consequences such as workers ‘job-shopping’ or low-skilled workers finding it difficult to negotiate transfer administration.

Industry and state and territory, and Pacific governments noted that any portability model would need to be subject to ongoing review, monitoring, and reporting to safeguard worker welfare. These processes would ensure recruitment caps were not exceeded and full-time work was offered where possible, given workers have no social security entitlements and may rely on employer-organised accommodation. Further, it was suggested that worker skills, including cultural literacy and level of English language proficiency, be further considered in developing portability arrangements.

2.2 Accreditation and the Trusted Trader concept

There was strong support from industry for exploring the role a Trusted Trader concept might play in the methodology of the marketplace model. The concept of a Trusted Trader, it was argued, could be used to incentivise PALM scheme employers to strive for a higher level of performance by offering streamlined administration and potentially preferential treatment to employers who have established a level of performance that exceeds the scheme’s minimum standards. Possible areas for preferential treatment included priority visa processing, immediate support from DFAT, DEWR and the Pacific Labour Facility, reduced reporting obligations and preferential client management. There were mixed views on having fast-track access to workers.

The potential risk of PALM scheme employers cutting corners if there was lower scrutiny over time was also raised by community and diaspora groups.

Many stakeholders argued that third-party accreditation schemes could have a role to play in the scheme, but that they were not sufficiently robust to replace existing processes, particularly the AE approvals process to enter the scheme. Stakeholders noted that standards in third party accreditation schemes would need to be in line with the existing integrity checks and operational standards of the PALM scheme.

Alternative suggestions to streamline processes were to have a stronger focus on the PALM scheme employer to comply and self-audit. More broadly, the ANU proposed one common industry accreditation system for the PALM scheme with a bottom-up compliance approach to support flexibility in setting standards, address complex operating conditions, and reduce narrow compliance requirements. This, they argued would address the lack of public transparency created by multiple industry accreditation systems, with their own third-party audit arrangements, operating within one industry.

2.3 Expanding the definition of agriculture and postcode exemption eligibility

Stakeholders from the horticulture and meat processing industries and state and territory government voiced that broadening the definition of agriculture under the PALM scheme to incorporate other subsectors of agriculture in the supply chain, including food processing and meat processing, would fill labour shortages, recognise well performing employers and not pose a risk to PALM workers or displace local employees. However, some stakeholders commented that expanding eligibility to urban areas may come to the detriment of employers in rural and regional Australia.

'Arguably, all horticulture and meat processing across Australia should be eligible where there is a demonstrated need (labour market testing) regardless of location.' – AEA

The care, accommodation, hospitality, and tourism sectors and Pacific Governments also expressed support for expanding postcode eligibility to metropolitan areas to fill labour shortages, open the scheme to these industries nationwide and provide more opportunities for women. Views were mixed amongst unions while the ANU supported the removal of postcode restrictions for meat processing.

Further concerns raised regarding expanding postcode eligibility to urban areas related to workers finding it a more attractive option than being placed in a regional area, and the welfare of workers with more opportunities for negative social influences, greater culture shock and higher cost of living. A suggestion to mitigate this from community and diaspora groups was to have enhanced social supports in urban areas.

3. Reducing the burden of upfront travel costs

The majority of industry stakeholders expressed support for an underwriting model on the basis that it would ensure employers were not out of pocket, while keeping administration simple. It was noted by these stakeholders that recoupment of costs through tax could be burdensome and that any movement of funds between government and industry would increase red tape and obligations for PALM scheme employers with smaller growers least able to meet these.

'An underwriting model would ensure that where a worker does not complete their recruitment, the AE is able to lodge a claim for reimbursement of the workers international flights costs from the Government. This initiative would significantly reduce a key financial risk associated with participation in the program.' – AFPA


'AUSVEG is supportive of the underwriting model, where the employers could claim back the costs of the worker if a worker does not start or finish their recruitment. This would make the scheme more attractive by reducing the financial risk associated with participation.' – AUSVEG

While some stakeholders preferred DFAT or a travel company take responsibility for flight bookings, others viewed this model as a way for PALM scheme employers to continue to manage their own recruitments with the added support of government protections and minimal intervention. The AEA and Growcom provided the same conditional support for an unwriting model.

'Covering the cost of airfares is only one component of the upfront costs. AEs still need to cover visas, transfer costs, staff advances, deposits for accommodation and vehicles, etc. The underwriting of flight costs is supported based on the following provisos:

- *The process of claiming unrecovered flights is quick and easy with minimal intervention.*
- *The underwriting of flights to include workers who do not board a flight, workers that disengage, terminated workers for poor performance and behaviour and breaches of Australian law.*
- *Underwriting of flight costs should be applicable to short- and long-term workers.*
- *The flight matrix be cancelled immediately as COVID is no longer a factor as commercial flights are now operating in most Pacific countries.*
- *The underwriting of flight costs should include other costs incurred by the AE for the benefit of the worker prior to arrival in Australia.'* – AEA

The view of unions was that workers ought not to pay the costs of their flights similar to other visa programs. They argued that either employers or the government should assume responsibility for the cost of flights.



The NFF expressed a preference for government recouping costs from workers through the tax or the Departing Australia Superannuation Payment, or a pool of money for PALM scheme employers to draw from to pay for travel costs. They argued that this would make the scheme more accessible for smaller growers.

“[I]t does little to actually make the scheme “more attractive” or increase accessibility to producers who do not currently use it. It is therefore much less appealing than the election commitment and represents a significant departure from it.” – NFF

Pacific governments indicated that they would not support a model that would result in an increase in taxes for PALM scheme workers. Industry and LSUs suggested scenarios for reimbursement of flight costs such as where a worker fell ill on arrival; did not complete their placement prior to repaying their travel costs; was terminated due to poor performance, behaviour, or breaches of the law; did not board the plane; or disengaged. LSUs noted the importance of a ‘no fault’ (of the employer) condition to the policy.

Industry and PALM scheme employers emphasised the need to keep the administrative burden associated with the underwriting model to a minimum and suggested that employers should be given the ‘benefit of the doubt’ on claims for reimbursement.

Overall, industry noted the need for strong criteria, a clear position on redeployment and repatriation of disengaged workers and consideration given to unwinding other costs incurred by the PALM scheme employer for the benefit of the worker prior to arrival in Australia.

3.1 Making seasonal/short term deployment more attractive

Feedback during consultations was that upfront travel costs were not the most significant impediment to small growers’ participation in the PALM scheme. Issues such as lack of accommodation, financial losses if workers disengage, inability to meet the scheme’s requirement for minimum work hours, and challenges with workforce planning were more critical obstacles.

“In order to successfully expand (at least on the demand side), the scheme will need to be accessible to all farmers.” – NFF

4. Other key themes

4.1 Addressing ‘brain drain’

During consultations, the ANU and stakeholders from industry noted the opportunity to reduce brain drain through countries’ recruitment strategies, providing training opportunities to build skills of value to partner countries, and focussing on countries with larger population bases such as the Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, and PNG, instead of Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu. The potential for brain drain was particularly a concern raised by Pacific and Timor-Leste Governments and HoMs. They noted a desire to ensure any movements are sustainable by maintaining circular mobility and ensuring the scheme targets and upskills unemployed or low-skilled workers, to deliver a skills dividend or ‘brain gain’ for the Pacific and Timor-Leste.

LSUs suggested training within sending countries to ‘replace’ departing workers and for mobilisation periods to be extended so employers in sending countries had sufficient time to recruit a replacement before a worker left for Australia. Pacific governments also noted sending countries may choose to cap their involvement in specific sectors, and that they could work more closely together to identify workforce needs and shortages amongst Pacific countries.

4.2 Worker disengagement

Pacific and Timor-Leste HoMs emphasised the need to address the issues that could contribute to worker disengagement such as poor accommodation, low earnings while deductions take place, individuals enticing workers to apply for protection visas and improper behaviour of PALM scheme employers. The need for the Pacific and Timor-Leste governments to be in the information loop on disengagements and to work together to investigate workers who disengage and help them re-engage was also raised.

Pacific governments considered key drivers of disengagement to include insufficient work and emphasised the importance of improving the complaints process, so workers' concerns are dealt with in a timely manner. Industry suggested greater oversight of workers who disengage, further education and support for workers to remain with their AE, a transparent grievance process for workers and a national labour hire licencing scheme to prevent workers being approached by unethical labour hire contractors.

4.3 Pre-departure briefings and on-arrival briefings

Pre-departure briefings emerged as a significant theme during consultations, with stakeholders commenting that pre-departure briefings did not provide enough information about worker rights and entitlements, healthcare and responsible alcohol consumption. Pacific governments also emphasised workers and their families needed more support pre-departure, over a longer period.

Stakeholders emphasised that information about the PALM scheme and workers' rights should always be simple and in plain English, and in the languages of sending countries. Workers suggested using visuals or videos to help convey information. There were further suggestions from community and diaspora groups for the inclusion of technology, including providing video or podcast materials on social media, utilising community radio broadcasts in appropriate languages, repeating critical messaging and developing an app for workers. The ANU also raised the importance of key conditions and information in workers' contracts to be provided in the worker's first language.


'Another improvement to the PALM scheme would be adapting and providing information to workers in more culturally-appropriate formats that recognise most workers are coming from an oral, rather than written, culture.' - Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of VIC and TAS; PICQ; PICSA; NSW Council for Pacific Communities

Pacific governments and community and diaspora groups emphasised the importance of culturally specific approaches built into worker preparation and training materials in language. A local government commented that better cultural education was required to ensure workers understand Australian social norms and safety standards. Pacific governments further suggested that briefings focus on ensuring workers know the characteristics of a good employer, and to include more scenario-based training and cover issues such as financial management, goal setting and healthy relationships.

4.4 Reintegration

Pacific governments emphasised the need to focus more on reintegration, including for affected families, as this is an area that has received less attention than worker preparedness and deployment. Some issues workers could face on their return include difficulties adjusting due to family separation or unreasonable expectations about pay having received higher salaries.

LSUs suggested more emphasis and support to connect returning workers to employment opportunities at home, to set up pathways to entrepreneurship and to consider other successful programs such as Vanuatu's establishment of a reintegration officer. Pacific governments also noted the need for alignment of skills



developed in Australia to those easily transferrable back to sending countries so they can be reintegrated into the domestic economy, including soft skills.

4.5 Ongoing training, support, and engagement

Workers expressed strong interest in accessing more upskilling opportunities while in Australia, for better recognition of existing skills and opportunities to match people with relevant training. Several stakeholders across industry, unions and state and territory and Pacific governments highlighted the benefit of workers earning a qualification or participating in training while working, potentially between work placements. LSUs suggested expanding Australian Pacific Training Coalition training to a broader cohort to bridge skills gaps when workers return home.

Consideration was requested by industry, local government and community and diaspora groups for mentorship programs matching workers with Australians with the expertise in establishing new businesses, workers with cultural mentors, or new program participants with long-established PALM scheme employers.

This could be supplemented by cultural awareness training for PALM scheme employers and spending time in sending countries. LSUs suggested inductions for PALM scheme employers, so they are clear on their responsibilities and understand how to build good relationships with workers.

'It is not the types of employers that are important, but rather that the employers are suitable to work with people from the Pacific Islands and Timor-Leste.' - Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of VIC and TAS; PICO; PICSA; NSW Council for Pacific Communities

LSUs noted the importance of support groups for families offshore and regular communication between workers and their families through access to phones and the internet. Various stakeholders called for regular employer and worker surveys. They also suggested independent, professional, and culturally relevant mediation be available for disputes between PALM scheme employers and workers where existing dispute resolution processes have failed. HoMs also supported strong mechanisms in workplaces for workers to air grievances and dissatisfaction.


HoMs suggested there are too many layers of communication in the PALM scheme, making it unclear whether to go to the PLF, DFAT or DEWR on certain matters. Industry requested government consider the application of customer service best practice. It was also suggested that current consultative mechanisms could be improved including by involving more workers directly.

4.6 Reducing red tape

Red tape reduction emerged as a key theme during consultations, with industry, academics and local and Pacific governments seeking measures such as less onerous reporting requirements, alignment of the SWP and Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) and a single department administering PALM. They also sought review and increased transparency of the PALM scheme worker recruitment process, reduced time for approval of recruitment applications and duplication between individual recruitment applications where the same information is sought multiple times, and a streamlined process for PALM scheme employers whose employment and accommodation arrangements have been previously approved.

'A reduction in 'red tape' will be critical to the future expansion and success of the scheme.' – NFF

Industry, local government and community and diaspora groups agreed the Red Tape Reduction Working Group was the appropriate avenue to take forward this agenda item with proposed reforms, subject to



greater industry participation and stakeholder consultation. In contrast, unions proposed stronger regulation be part of a more holistic agenda of reforming the PALM scheme.

Community and diaspora groups and HoMs suggested the government examine streamlined processes for workers to better understand deductions and to reclaim their superannuation at the end of their placement to reduce the risk of exploitation. LSUs supported this, suggesting a standardised payslip showing remaining debts, providing information in language on deductions, having a preferred PALM super provider and initiating a superannuation working group.

'Unreasonable deductions are one of the main issues workers face on PALM, which often lack transparency and can leave workers with insufficient income to meet living expenses.' – Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)

Attachment B: Virtual and face to face consultation

Date	Location	Stakeholders
1 September 2022	Canberra	Pacific and Timor-Leste Heads of Mission
5 September 2022	Online	PALM Care Committee Members
6 September 2022	Online	AEA, AFPA, AUSVEG, NFF, Tourism Accommodation Australia (TAA), Australian Meat Industry Council (AMIC), Community Services Industry Alliance (CSIA), Citrus Australia, Vegetables WA, Teys Australia, FIP Group, Northern Territory Farmers, Northern Territory Chamber of Commerce
8 September 2022	Online	AEA, AFPA, AUSVEG, NFF, TAA, AMIC, CSIA, Citrus Australia, Teys, FIP Group, NT Farmers, PeopleIN, Vegetables WA, The Connect Group, NT Chamber of Commerce
9 September 2022	Online	PALM Meat Processing Committee Members
9 September 2022	Online	National Disability Services, Mercy Services
9 September 2022	Online	PALM Red Tap Reduction Working Group Members
13 September 2022	Online	Agriculture Committee Members
14 September 2022	Online	AEA, AFPA, AUSVEG, NFF, TAA, AMIC, CSIA, Citrus Australia, Teys, FIP Group, NT Farmers, PeopleIN, Vegetables WA, The Connect Group, Vernview, NT Chamber of Commerce
15 September 2022	Online	PALM Welfare and Wellbeing Working Group members
19 September 2022	Gatton	PALM scheme workers
19 September 2022	Brisbane	AEA, Teys Australia, AMIC
19 September 2022	Brisbane	CSIA, Growcom, AEA
19 September 2022	Brisbane	SDRC, PICQ, AEA
19 September 2022	Brisbane	PeopleIN, FIP Group
19 September 2022	Brisbane	Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, Queensland Department of the Premier and Cabinet
23 September 2022	Online	TAA
23 September 2022	Online	New South Wales Department of Primary Industries
27 September 2022	Online	PALM Advisory Group members
28 September 2022	Online	Northern Territory Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade, South Australia Department of Primary Industries and Regions, Tasmania Department of Premier and Cabinet, Australian Capital Territory Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development, Western Australia Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development
29 September 2022	Online	PICQ, PICSA, Salvation Army
30 September 2022	Canberra	ANU
6 October 2022	Online	Commonwealth, State and Territory Working Group members
6 October 2022	Online	Industry Working Group members
9 October 2022	Altona Meadows	PALM scheme workers
10 October 2022	Melbourne	Uniting Church in Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Fr Peter O'Neill, Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans

Date	Location	Stakeholders
10 October 2022	Melbourne	AMIC
10 October 2022	Melbourne	AFPA, AUSVEG, Citrus Australia
10 October 2022	Melbourne	MADEC Australia, Vernview, The Connect Group
11 October 2022	Melbourne	ACTU, Australian Workers Union, United Workers Union
11 October 2022	Melbourne	Health Services Union, Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation
11 October 2022	Melbourne	Victoria Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victoria Department of Jobs, Precincts and Regions, Victoria Department of Health, Victoria Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Victoria Department of Treasury and Finance, Victoria Department of Education and Training
12 October 2022	Online	Health X, Claire Field & Associates
13 October 2022	Online	Australasian Meat Industry Employers Union
14 October 2022	Online	Plant Grow Pick, Owen Pacific Workforce, Labour Solutions, ICOMPLY, AEA, Vernview
18 – 19 October 2022	Nadi	Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu representatives
21 October 2022	Canberra	Pacific and Timor-Leste Heads of Mission
25 October 2022	Canberra	Mr Sakias Tameo, Deputy High Commissioner for Papua New Guinea
27 October 2022	Canberra	Ms Camilla Solomon, High Commissioner for Nauru
31 October 2022	Online	Cassino Food Co-op
2 November 2022	Canberra	Mr Curtis Tuihalangie, Deputy High Commissioner for Tonga
2 November 2022	Carrick	Berried in Tasmania, Super Jay
2 November 2022	Devenport	Youth Family and Community Connections, Tongan Country Liaison Officer
2 November 2022	Launceston	Linx Employment, Costa Group
2 November 2022	Devenport	PALM scheme workers
3 November 2022	Launceston	Hillwood Berries
3 November 2022	Launceston	Migrant Resource Centre Tasmania
3 November 2022	Longford	Dairy Australia
3 November 2022	Longford	Mountford, JBS Longford, Burlington
3 November 2022	Longford	PALM scheme workers
3 November 2022	Online	United Workers Union
4 November 2022	Hobart	Tasmanian Government
4 November 2022	Canberra	Ms Hinauri Petana, High Commissioner for Samoa
4 November 2022	Canberra	Ms Inês Maria DE Almeida, Ambassador of Timor-Leste

Attachment C: Written submissions

Stakeholder Group	Written Submissions
Academia	2
Community Groups	1
Employer	3
- agriculture	- 1
- care	- 2
Government	4
- state/territory	- 3
- local/regional	- 1
Industry Body	7
- agriculture	- 6
- other	- 1
Unions	2
Total	19