

# Submission

## Supporting strong and sustainable regions: Review of Regional Migration Settings

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TASMANIA

## **About Migrant Resource Centre Tasmania**

The Migrant Resource Centre Tasmania (MRC Tas) has supported humanitarian entrants and migrants to settle in Tasmania for more than 40 years. It is the only state-wide specialist migrant support service in Tasmania, with offices in the South, North and North West of the State. Our programs include settlement services (SETS and HSP), aged care and community services, Multicultural Youth Tasmania, employment support and specialist torture and trauma counselling and mental health services. Through the delivery of our extensive suite of programs, MRC Tas connects with a wide range of CALD individuals arriving on humanitarian, family and skilled migrant visas. MRC Tas is one of the few settlement services in the state to provide support and programs for people arriving on skilled migrant visas.

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## **Background**

Regional settlement in Tasmania is mutually beneficial for migrants, communities and the State as a whole. Whilst we welcome and encourage increased arrival numbers, it is important that a range of challenges are addressed. Too frequently, these challenges lead to difficulties in attracting and retaining migrants. Suitable preparation and support from government, settlement services and communities, and appropriate infrastructure could help ensure successful settlement journeys for an increased number of migrants in regional areas, including Tasmania.

### *Settlement Trends in Tasmania*

Migration to Tasmania has been on a steady increase in the last decade. The Tasmanian government aims to increase Tasmania's population from 515,000 to 650,000 by 2050, with the milestone target of 570,000 persons by 2030 reached seven years ahead of schedule in 2022 (Tasmanian Government, 2022). In the decade leading up to the COVID 19 pandemic, Tasmania saw a steady increase in skilled migrants settling in the state, with an all time high of 5,317 people in 2019 (up from 701 in 2010 and 1,864 in 2015).

International migration is a significant contributor to growth in Tasmania, with net interstate migration tending to be less significant for the state (Centre for Population, 2023). Natural increase (births minus deaths) has been decreasing over time, and forecasts predict that deaths will outnumber births in the state in the early 2030s (ID, 2023).

All Tasmanian Local Government Areas (LGAs), except for Flinders, grew between 2016 and 2023. The southern region, particularly around the capital city, continues to be significantly more populated. The Greater Hobart area (Clarence, Glenorchy, Hobart, and Kingborough LGAs) and Launceston experienced the highest growth in the number of people. In 2021 census, Hobart and Glenorchy placed among top 20 LGAs by inflow of overseas born population to regional cities Australia wide (Houghton et al, 2023).

However, from being the second fastest growing State in September 2019 (1.8 per cent), Tasmania has fallen to be the slowest growing state in September 2023 (0.3 per cent). Net Internal Migration has recently returned to a net outflow from Tasmania (-3,100), indicating that some migrants are not settling long term but returning or moving interstate. Additionally, net overseas migration has not recovered from record low levels observed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

MRC Tas is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the Review of Regional Migration Settings.

Our responses to the discussion paper questions draw on surveys conducted with migrant community members as part of the Tasmanian Governments' Multicultural action plan consultation, jointly run by MRC Tas, MCOT and Welcome Cultural Services (formerly MRC North) (MAP 2023). They also draw on information and feedback from clients through client needs surveys, DSS funded research into settlement experiences in Tasmania (Merrick 2020), as well as program evaluations carried

This submission focuses on the questions most related to our organisation's purpose. However, in relation to the discussion paper as a whole we note:

- The current complexity of visa pathways are very difficult for most employers to navigate and participate in appropriate schemes. More support is needed especially for smaller organisation to navigate sponsored visas to attract the workers needed in Tasmania.
- Regional definitions are confusing and also simplify or obviate key economic and socio-cultural differences in the different locations and cities classified as regional. 'Regional' includes most capital cities except Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, which means many more remote and rural regional areas are struggling with skill shortages as most migrants decide to stay in capital cities, while still meeting their 'regional' requirements.

## **Response to Questions**

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

#### ***Barriers to settlement and retention in Tasmania***

Nearly half (47.8%) of the Tasmanian CALD individuals surveyed for the MAP consultation are financially insecure, despite 76.9% of the CALD individuals having attained educational qualifications at university (e.g., bachelor, diploma) or post-graduate level.

Tasmanian CALD community member's economic participation is deterred by various factors, including:

- biased recruitment practices, inadequate local work experience or networks,
- difficulties attaining language skills and required qualifications, and
- rejection of overseas qualifications.

In Australia, people born overseas are employed in less skilled jobs than Australians with the same qualifications; and in Tasmania this trend is even more pronounced (ABS 2021). Nearly half of the CALD individuals surveyed for the MAP consultation (47.5%) indicated that finding employment that utilises their skills and qualifications is either difficult or very difficult (MAP

2023). Tasmanian employers are more likely to use word of mouth and not advertise roles when recruiting new staff, presenting a barrier for those with limited networks (National Skills Commission, 2023).

There is inadequate support and services for migrants and humanitarian entrants settling in regional areas, including Tasmania. CALD communities in Tasmania experience difficulties accessing essential services such as healthcare, housing and education. The MAP consultation found that barriers to accessing services included:

- systemic discrimination,
- limited access to public transportation,
- a lack of translated materials and interpreters that resulted in language barriers, and
- inadequate customer service for CALD members, where there is a lack of understanding of migrants' unique situations.

Health care is a particular issue even for those migrants that have access to Medicare. People struggle to see a doctor or healthcare provider due to new patient admission issues and long waiting lists, as well as language barriers that hinder understanding, under-use of qualified interpretation services, access to health information for new arrivals, lack of bulk-billing GP clinics and cost of basic and additional healthcare that changes based on visa categories.

Accessing housing can be difficult, especially for humanitarian entrants due to stringent requirements for renting a property for new migrants, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing stock, CALD community members' lack of knowledge on tenancy rights and financial literacy. In Tasmania, even in the major regional cities of Hobart and Launceston, affordable housing tends to be on the outer suburban fringes not well served, if at all, by the very limited Tasmania public transport service.

### ***Factors to improve retention of migrants***

The factors encouraging migrants and people from refugee background to settle long term in regional cities and areas in Tasmania may differ to other regional areas in Australia.

Tasmania also differs from many regional settlement areas due to its relatively small size, meaning that settlement services such as MRC Tas are co-located with other important services such as youth services, employment services, aged care and counselling/mental health support. This presents a benefit as these services are easier to access and are not as impacted by fluctuating migration numbers.

Many migrants choose to come to Tasmania because of the lifestyle, access to nature, smaller and quieter cities, and because historically the cost of housing and living was cheaper. However, many migrants arriving here on skilled, working visas and on humanitarian visas do not stay longer term and move to the mainland, generally due to better employment opportunities and difficulty in securing housing.

The major factors that would encourage migrants to settle long term in Tasmania are:

- Employment - ability to secure good quality jobs that are appropriate to the level of people's qualifications and working experience outside Australia.
- Skills and qualification recognition - to secure quality jobs that make use of migrants' backgrounds require better systems to recognise overseas qualifications and also place value on skills gained in overseas employment.
- Housing - availability of affordable, appropriate housing that suits different family structures, including single adults, single mothers up to large families and multi-generational families.
- Welcoming schools and councils that promote multiculturalism

People arriving to Tasmania on Humanitarian visas face similar issues with securing employment and housing, and are additionally impacted by lower levels of English literacy. They also face compounded difficulties in terms of social and cultural connection as links to their communities are impacted by the fact that there are multiple small emerging communities in Tasmania, with a diversity of languages, ethnicities and religions.

Factors that would encourage migrants and particularly humanitarian migrants to settle include:

- Access to places of worship - many religious groups do not have access to appropriate places of worship or available religious elders to run services.
- Connection with community - many emerging communities are small and split between the major settlement cities of Hobart and Launceston
- Ability to reunite with family members still living outside Australia

For people on humanitarian visas, long term retention would be improved by focusing on co-locating communities from similar backgrounds in the two main regional settlement cities in Tasmania. Communities could also be strengthened by improving the rates of issuing of family visas and special humanitarian visas to applicants in Tasmania with humanitarian background. Many arrive here as unlinked refugees, especially Women at Risk, whose long-term retention and successful settlement and inclusion could be secured by prioritising family reunion for family members. Community leaders from humanitarian backgrounds observe that family re-union is one of the most crucial factors in encouraging families to settle long term.

**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?**

It is unclear whether the length of provisional visas is related to the retention of migrants in regions. More important than length of time is how well migrants can settle and feel a sense of belonging in an area. This relies on securing meaningful employment sooner, which is difficult when people have limited work rights and, more importantly, do not have permanent visas. Tasmanian employers have expressed hesitation to employ someone on a temporary visa, but without employment, temporary visa holders are less likely to gain permanent residency. Education for employers is needed around provisional visas, and information about qualification recognition needs to be provided to employers to help them understand what qualifications are transferable and relevant to Australian qualifications.

Skilled migrants and humanitarian entrants continue to face additional challenges in the job market, including a lack of diversity in some Tasmanian workplaces and the impact of racism and discrimination. There is a need for widely available and affordable diversity and inclusion workforce programs to be rolled out across employers in key sectors such as building and construction, hospitality, and agriculture. More support for community capacity building activities from organisations like MRC Tas could help to build the cultural competency of employers and workforces across regional areas.

Another key factor is access to services such as Medicare which can impact migrants' decisions to stay in regional areas like Tasmania, where health care is expensive, hard to access and has very long waiting times for some procedures and tests.

***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?***

States play an important part in planning for migration and more flexibility in approach would be beneficial, especially in a state like Tasmania which is a unique regional settlement area.

State and Federal Government could make better use of the expertise already extant in organisations like MRC Tas, which provide settlement services across the state, to offer more support for skilled migrants and migrants on provisional visas, which would improve long term retention. For example, providing a suite of orientation services for skilled migrants and their families to connect them to the services and social support which is crucial to successful long-term settlement. Place based settlement and orientation information should be provided early in their migration journey.

The current occupation list is too broad and predominantly reflects nationwide needs rather than more specific regional occupations that are suffering crucial skill shortages but are not

on the list. State government is in a better position to work closely with local employers to map workforce needs, with consideration to availability of services in different regions.

More place-based support for development of micro and small businesses and entrepreneurship would also benefit many migrants.

Migration planning must include plans for mixed housing types, including medium density, cooperative housing, rent to buy schemes and other initiatives that can quickly expand housing stock.

Transport is also key to linking migrants to affordable housing and employment opportunities across the state. More investment in public transport, especially in areas with growing workforce needs, could address some of the settlement challenges migrants face.

## **Conclusion**

This submission highlights the factors critical for the successful settlement of migrants and refugees in Tasmania. The benefits that migration brings in addressing population and labour shortages in the region can only be realised if migrants, in turn, are provided with support and an inclusive environment to settle and live fulfilling lives.

MRC Tas recommends a holistic approach in addressing the needs and sometimes unique challenges faced by migrants to regional areas, to ensure long-term retention. This includes factoring in support and resources for employment, optimising processes for skills and qualification recognition, ensuring the availability of suitable housing, and promoting welcoming communities. It also involves working with employers to ensure migrants on provisional visas can gain employment and are not disadvantaged in their permanent visa pathways. Additional considerations should be given to humanitarian entrants, in terms of clustering emerging communities and providing simplified family reunification processes.

MRC Tas also urges better collaboration between State and Federal Government and regional settlement services to ensure the place-based settlement needs of both communities and migrants are met, including mapping workforce needs and skills shortages, infrastructure requirements and support needs. With successful collaboration Tasmania's potential for successful settlement of increased intakes across a range of visa types will be enhanced. We welcome additional arrivals and the opportunity for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to continue to bring social and economic benefits to the State.





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