

# Optimising PALM scheme delivery in Australia

Submission

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## About ACCPA

The Aged and Community Care Providers Association (ACCPA) is a national Industry Association for aged care providers offering retirement living, seniors housing, residential care, home care, community care and related services.

ACCPA exists to unite aged care providers under a shared vision to enhance the wellbeing of older Australians through a high performing, trusted and sustainable aged care sector. We support our members to provide high quality care and services while amplifying their views and opinions through an authoritative and comprehensive voice to the government, community and media.

Our sector serves to make better lives for older Australians, and so do we.

# Background

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme is Australia's primary temporary migration program for low, semi and unskilled positions that allows eligible Australian businesses to hire workers from nine Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste when there are not enough local workers available.

ACCPA understands that the PALM scheme helps to fill labour gaps in rural and regional Australia and agriculture nationally by offering employers access to a pool of reliable, productive workers. It also allows Pacific and Timor-Leste workers to take up jobs in Australia, develop their skills and send income home to support their families and communities.<sup>1</sup>

ACCPA notes that the Australian Government has decided to consolidate the domestic (onshore) delivery of the PALM scheme within the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) by gradually transferring the functions and responsibilities that support domestic delivery from the Pacific Labour Facility (PLF) to DEWR. The Department indicates that this transfer aims to provide stronger oversight of the operations of the scheme within the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations' portfolio, and in partnership with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is consulting with stakeholders to inform the design of the domestic PALM delivery model.<sup>2</sup>

ACCPA welcomes the opportunity to comment on optimising the operations of the PALM scheme in Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Employment and Workplace Relations website at <https://www.dewr.gov.au/pacific-australia-labour-mobility-scheme>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Employment and Workplace Relations website at <https://www.dewr.gov.au/pacific-australia-labour-mobility-scheme/consultations/optimising-palm-scheme-delivery-australia>

## Key points

- ACCPA is supportive of the PALM scheme and are appreciative of the opportunity for aged care providers to participate as approved employers.
- ACCPA members with experience of the PALM scheme, report outstanding outcomes once workers are in place, and are very positive about the contribution PALM workers make to an organisation's capacity to deliver quality care.
- There are, however, challenges involved in the process for securing workers under the PALM scheme including administrative complexity, such that it is prohibitive for some aged care providers to engage with the scheme.
- ACCPA notes the shift by government for the PALM scheme to be operated by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations and welcomes the opportunity this brings to improve aspects of the scheme.
- Among suggestions for possible improvements in the operations of the scheme include implementing a case management approach and establishing a holistic and integrated IT system for PALM.

## PALM scheme in aged care

ACCPA is supportive of the PALM scheme and are appreciative of the opportunity for aged care providers to participate as approved employers. The aged care workforce is fundamental to providing quality care outcomes for older Australians and the current recruitment and retention challenges facing aged care providers make innovative solutions such as the PALM scheme, highly valuable and important to the sector.

ACCPA acknowledges the comments of Prime Minister Albanese in mid-2022 while announcing an expansion of the scheme, including in aged care, where he said,

*‘It’s a way of boosting the economy here, whilst making a real difference back in Australia. I think this is an example of whereby our practical partnership is producing such an enormous benefit. And we can see today, the pride that these women were having in learning the skills that they are learning and being able to contribute to that. The other thing is, particularly, I think, appropriate in terms of aged care, one of the things about the Pacific that I know from my practical experience in both visiting here, but also with the diaspora in Australia, is that part of the culture here is respect for elders. And that is something that is really important when it comes to people working in aged care, getting satisfaction about assisting people who need that assistance in their later years.’<sup>3</sup>*

ACCPA welcomes, as part of the Australian Government Budget 2022-23, the increase in investment of the PALM scheme in aged care such as training for aged care workers as well as supporting Australian aged care employers to recruit more workers through the PALM scheme.<sup>4</sup> ACCPA hopes the feedback provided in this submission will also inform this expansion project and ultimately, more PALM participants working in Australia’s aged care sector.

ACCPA has engaged with members who have direct experience of the PALM scheme in aged care and find that they experience outstanding outcomes once workers are in place, and are extremely positive about the contribution PALM workers make to their organisation’s capacity to deliver high quality care to residents.

As a member from regional Queensland said,

*‘Our efforts to recruit locally have been disappointing, resulting in insufficient numbers being recruited using conventional means. We requested eight PALM workers be allocated to our business and after a period of time we were fortunate enough to have five workers allocated to us. The five workers have been model carers! They have high levels of enthusiasm, empathy, and have developed their care skills rapidly. We consider ourselves very fortunate to have them working in our facility and have since requested additional workers be assigned to our business.’*

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Albanese MP, Prime Minister of Australia, *Transcript: Doorstop Interview, Suva, Fiji, Friday 15 July 2022*, at <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/doorstop-interview-suva-fiji-1>

<sup>4</sup> Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme, *Budget 2022-23: Frequently asked questions on the PALM scheme reforms* at <https://www.palmscheme.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/PALM%20scheme%20reforms%20FAQs.pdf> noting that ‘The scheme will expand existing pilots by supporting a further 500 workers in 2023 to complete their Certificate III in Individual Support (Ageing). A range of training delivery options will be considered to help workers to take up this opportunity and ensure successful outcomes for the Pacific and Timor-Leste and Australian employers.’

Providers are also finding they need to make decisions about the value of investment of resources in using the scheme for their particular circumstances. A member in regional New South Wales noted:

*‘Overall, the investment of time required for recruitment, selection, mobilisation and then cultural training is significant, but the rewards are enormous and well worth it. In a regional area where staffing is a constant challenge, this goes a long way to ensuring shifts are covered and staff are on hand to provide the care to residents that they need.’*

ACCPA is keen to see ongoing opportunities for those with experience of, or interest in, the PALM scheme to offer their perspective on possible improvements - to ensure more aged care residents and workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste benefit from this important initiative.

# Challenges for aged care providers

Whilst outcomes from the scheme are very strong, there are some challenges involved for providers in the process for securing workers under the PALM scheme.

*As one member said, 'We have found that the scheme has good intentions in bringing overseas workers to the aged care sector, and the workers have a positive impact, and are much appreciated however, we find the scheme to have a significant administrative burden on the approved employers.'*

We have also found from member feedback, that this is having some impact on provider capacity and willingness to engage with the scheme.

## **Administrative complexity**

*'The concept sounded enticing but we found the application process was extensive and bureaucratic.'*

While members understood the need for some requirements specific to the PALM scheme, they reported finding the overall administrative complexity to be challenging to navigate, such that some decided not to embark on the process.

Visa processing challenges for specific workers in some cases also caused delays.

## **Resources required to engage with the scheme**

*'It took us 12 months; ideally it should be 3 months or less; in hindsight, it would have been more cost-efficient to have travelled to the home country to undertake the required processes.'*

For members working in a highly competitive workforce market, the time taken to engage with the scheme from inception to when a worker is available, was seen as too long.

## **Uncertainty**

*'We also explored a partnership option with an existing approved employer and we hired the staff through them. However, due to supply issues the costs were regularly changing as were the prospects of actually receiving any staff.'*

Members also reported that a changing landscape with respect to potential workers introduced some uncertainty for them in the process. For example, one member planned for eight workers, but towards the end of the process, three withdrew but the member still incurred the costs involved in planning accommodation for the original number.

## **Engagement with PALM scheme staff**

Members reported challenges with engagement of PALM staff whereby members would find they had to inform staff throughout their journey about PALM scheme processes and past decisions. This was thought to be due to their lack of understanding of the PALM as well as what appeared to be poor information management about past advice/decisions provided.

## **Engagement with home countries**

Members also reported that engagement with labour sending units (LSUs) in home countries as variable and the need for greater support with this aspect of the PALM scheme.

## Possible areas for improvement

Following engagement with members who have either considered the scheme or have implemented the scheme, ACCPA poses the following suggestions for improvement:

- Streamlining processes where at all possible;
- Implementing a case management approach for approved employers, whether that be individual case managers or a team that share centrally accessible information about the approved employer's pathway through PALM;
- Implementing a holistic PALM IT system integrated from end to end (possibly similarly to a typical recruitment portal but designed for the PALM schemes specific requirements);
- Fostering ways in which approved employers can seek in-country consular or other similar support;
- Addressing barriers to entry for approved employers such as the complexity, administrative intensity and identify ways to improve issues such as access to regional housing;
- Promoting successful ways of setting up programs/approaches for success that have been utilised by existing approved employers, particularly those that harness or compliment the cultural strengths brought by workers;
- Undertaking for approved employers an induction to the cultural context of PALM workers - as a corollary to the existing 3 day preparation for PALM workers before they leave their country about the Australian context; and
- Continuing to seek input from approved employers via engagement or advisory mechanisms to tailor improvements to the scheme.