

## Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN)

Submission in response to the *Supporting strong and sustainable regions: Review of Regional Migration Settings Discussion Paper*

July 2024

## About MYAN

MYAN is the national peak body representing the rights and interests of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in Australia, and those who work with them.

We work in partnership with young people, government, and non-government agencies at the state and territory and national levels to ensure that the needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are recognised and addressed in policy and service delivery. We provide expert policy advice, undertakes a range of sector development activities, and support young people to develop leadership skills.

**MYAN's vision is that all young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are supported, valued and thriving in Australia.**

MYAN Australia is available to work with the Department of Home Affairs to provide further information in relation to this submission. For further information on this submission please contact:

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*MYAN acknowledges the traditional Custodians upon the lands on which we work and pay respect to their Elders past and present. We acknowledge that Sovereignty was never ceded and recognise that this land was, is, and always will be Aboriginal Land. We work towards reconciliation with, and self-determination for the First Peoples of this country.*

## Background

MYAN supports regional settlement for migrants and refugees, recognising its potential social and economic benefits. Despite these potential benefits, significant limitations exist, with only 14% of migrants residing outside capital cities, compared to 34% of the overall Australian population, and a quarter of migrants leaving regional areas within five years.<sup>1</sup> To improve regional settlement outcomes, MYAN has consistently highlighted the importance of careful planning and understanding local capacity to address young people's needs including in areas like employment, education, housing, social connection and health.

We note that the discussion paper does not specifically mention young refugees. It is important to take into consideration that the settlement needs of young people will differ from those of adults and children, and young people will need targeted, specialised supports to assist in their navigation of their settlement journey.

In regional consultations undertaken by MYAN across Australia in 2023, young people and settlement sector advocates identified the following significant challenges with regional settlement:

- **Major gaps in health services and education** including chronic shortages in doctors, dentists, mental health professionals, and teachers leading to missed opportunities for early intervention and poor outcomes.
- **Critical gaps in English language** training and support.
- **Limited infrastructure**, including in particular, with respect to housing and transport, making it difficult to find accommodation and make social connections.
- **Subsequent disengagement of young people** and desire to move to urban areas, driven largely by limited options and support with respect to employment, education and social connection.<sup>2</sup>

## Response to the Discussion Paper

Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Supporting strong and sustainable regions: Review of Regional Migration Settings Discussion Paper*. Our submission is informed by our work with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds across Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Home Affairs (2023), Review of the migration system at <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-publications/reviews-and-inquiries/departamentalreviews/migration-system-for-australias-future> based on 2016 ABS data.

<sup>2</sup> MYAN (2023) Navigating Youth Settlement in Australia: Challenges and Opportunities Report of national consultations conducted by the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) Available at: <https://myan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Navigating-Youth-Settlement-in-Australia-Challenges-and-Opportunities.pdf>

Our submission responds broadly to Questions 6. And 8 of the Discussion Paper.

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

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?

In response to the discussion paper on regional settlement, MYAN has identified several key factors based on our recent consultations with young people in regional areas. It is evident that suitable employment opportunities and housing affordability are pivotal in the **retention of refugees** in these regions. These factors not only contribute to the initial settlement experience but also play a significant role in preventing secondary migration from metropolitan areas. When refugees find stable employment and affordable housing, they are more likely to build roots and integrate into the community, fostering long-term stability and growth for both the individuals and the regions. Conversely, **the failure of some regional areas to attract or retain a refugee population** can be attributed to a lack of proper infrastructure and essential services, particularly services that address the particular needs and aspirations of young refugees. Education and physical/mental health services are particularly crucial, as their absence can lead to significant challenges in daily life and long-term wellbeing. There are also gaps in services focussed on social supports, meeting tangible skills needs (for example, driving and computer skills) and to address housing needs for young people.

Mainstream services need to ensure they have a workforce skilled in cultural competency and youth-focused approaches that is well-equipped to identify and meet the diverse and complex needs of young people from refugee backgrounds. Young people should not be disadvantaged by their location or the type of service they are accessing. If the expectation is that young people are to be serviced by mainstream programs, then this needs to be universal and services previously underutilised by refugee young people need to be equally equipped with the skills and resources to work with refugee young people. This includes mental health, sexual and reproductive health or LGBTQI+ services, as well as in areas with less concentration of new arrivals.

Additionally, the sense of isolation and the lack of a welcoming and inclusive environment further deter refugees from settling in these areas. While some may continue to live in such regions due to existing employment opportunities, these factors ultimately undermine the sustainability of their settlement. When employment opportunities diminish, the likelihood of retaining this population decreases significantly. Therefore, it is imperative to address these shortcomings to create a supportive and inclusive environment that can attract and retain refugee populations in regional areas.

MYAN believes that migrant settlement in regional areas, including skilled workers, temporary migrants, and refugees, has the potential to provide multiple benefits to individuals and communities,

both economic and social. These include the stimulation of local economy and ease of pressure on urban infrastructure and services, improved acceptance of diversity resulting in improved social cohesion, and help to offset the impacts of ageing populations.<sup>3</sup>

MYAN's position is that realising these benefits first requires careful planning and an understanding of what works, and depends on the capacity of local settlement services to respond, particularly within the domains of employment, education and training, housing and health and well-being. For example, finding work in regional areas is particularly challenging due to limited English language classes, and a lack of specialist support services like torture and trauma counselling.<sup>4</sup>

Broadly, there needs to be a more coordinated approach to the settlement of refugees in regional communities. For regional settlement to be a long-term success, government support and long-term investment is needed to encourage refugees to settle in regional Australia, and to help ensure that communities are able to provide the services that are necessary to make settlement a long-term success.

### Current challenges experienced by young people and sector workers in regional areas

During the consultations MYAN held in regional areas in 2023, the key challenges identified by young people and sector workers in regional areas were:

#### Major gaps in education, health services and employment opportunities

- Constraints on availability and quality of education. Key here is the chronic shortage of teachers, and in particular, experienced teachers in high schools and to deliver TAFE courses. This includes both teacher recruitment and retention. There are also few post-school practical training courses available because of teacher shortages and small youth populations resulting in fewer opportunities for individuals seeking to enhance their practical skills after completing their formal education.
- Critical gaps in English language training and support. Some regional areas, including in Tasmania, do not have face-to-face intensive language programs and youth focussed AMEP classes, which are essential for both language acquisition and social connection. MYAN notes that online programs are useful to sit alongside face-to-face programs when young people are not able to attend in person, however they are not sufficient on their own.
- Critical gaps in health care: Chronic shortages of, and long waiting periods for, essential health services including General Practitioners (GPs), dentists and mental health providers limit opportunities for preventative health care and lead to poorer health outcomes.

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<sup>3</sup> Rural Australians for Refugees (2017) Inquiry into Migrant Settlement Outcomes Available at: [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/Migration/settlementoutcomes/Submissions](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Migration/settlementoutcomes/Submissions)

<sup>4</sup> Reilly, A (2018) *The Vulnerability of Safe Haven Enterprise Visa Holders: Balancing Work, Protection and Future Prospects* [2018] UNSW LawJl 30; (2018) 41(3) UNSW Law Journal 871

- Limited meaningful employment opportunities including challenges finding jobs for a range of reasons including insufficient jobs that meet career aspirations and existing skills; and racism and discrimination in recruitment processes.
- Limited capacity of settlement service to provide targeted and flexible support tailored to the diverse needs of young people.

### **Inadequate infrastructure**

- Difficulty finding housing in some areas and increased risk of homelessness because of lack of rental properties and stable long-term housing in regional areas; and because of peoples' concerns about lack of security and safety in some areas. There is also a gap in services available to support young people at risk of homelessness.
- Restrictions to the positive socio-economic engagement of young people due to limited transport infrastructure. Disengagement of young people and desire to move to urban areas.
- Disengagement from education. The lack of intensive language programs and support in schools can lead to disengagement from education being a particularly significant issue.
- The desire of young people to relocate after completing their education including, in particular, urban migration. We note that many of these issues are broadly consistent with those faced by other people living in regional areas. For example, living in regional cities often means dealing with limited job and career opportunities, lower incomes, reduced access to specialised services (particularly healthcare), and more limited social and recreational events, all while contending with limited public transportation.

These challenges can then be amplified for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds because of their specific complex needs and circumstances. Our findings also corroborate existing research and echo the concerns voiced by MYAN and other advocates for refugees and migrants. For instance, a recent report by Settlement Services International (SSI) highlighted issues such as an excessive reliance on visa conditions and new regional visas to promote regional settlement, without enough focus on helping newcomers establish themselves and encouraging urban residents to move to regional areas. SSI also identified how inflexible funding models for settlement programs make it harder to address regional constraints that affect refugee settlement, and a shortage of resources makes it difficult to initiate the community engagement initiatives that are vital to foster inclusion and a sense of belonging.<sup>5</sup> The findings are particularly concerning because they undermine the potential for:

- **Good individual outcomes for the young people.** For example, MYAN has previously found that settlement challenges are exacerbated for young people settled in areas facing persistent issues

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<sup>5</sup> Settlement Services International (SSI) 2023, Regional migration and settlement: putting down roots to revitalise regional communities in Australia at <https://apo.org.au/node/322957>

around housing affordability, high rates of youth unemployment and low numbers of humanitarian migrants;<sup>6</sup> and

- **Good regional outcomes associated with long term settlement.**

#### **Regional settlement: Planning, coordination and services**

For regional settlement to be a long-term success, reform is needed to encourage migrants to settle and stay in regional Australia, and to help ensure that communities can provide the essential services and support needed. Consistent themes in what is needed to make regional settlement work well over the long haul include adequate employment opportunities, housing, healthcare and English language classes. It is also clear that it is essential that the regional community welcomes people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and that people from refugee and migrant backgrounds feel a sense of belonging.<sup>7</sup> A consistent theme from MYAN's consultations was that this essential social, economic and community infrastructure is not always well established in the regional locations where migrants and refugees settle.

#### **Recommendations:**

**MYAN considers that in order to improve planning for regional migration and improve the outcomes of regional settlement:**

- Improvements must be made to pre-settlement planning and post-settlement outcomes analysis by thoroughly assessing regional locations to identify optimal youth resettlement sites. This should include developing and applying a common set of criteria:
  - Assessing regional settlement locations to determine availability of stable and affordable housing, and schooling and employment opportunities.
  - Identifying service gaps and response strategies.
  - Measuring community attitudes, and concerns towards refugees and migrants.
  - Involving First Nations communities in planning and decision making.
  - Consulting with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds about their experiences in regional towns.
- Regional settlement service providers should be funded to provide analysis on settlement outcomes of migrants and refugees in suggested migration locales, to ensure that settlement support and

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<sup>6</sup> MYAN & MCA (2021) Women at Risk Visa Holders (Subclass 204) Consultation Report Available at: <https://myan.org.au/reports-publications/women-atrisk-visa-holder-subclass-204-myan-consultation-report-in-collaboration-with-migration-council-australia-mca/>

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Piper, M (2017), Refugee Settlement in Regional Areas: Evidence based good Practice. Published by the Department of Premier and Cabinet. Available at [http://multicultural.nsw.gov.au/about\\_us/publications/others/](http://multicultural.nsw.gov.au/about_us/publications/others/); Phillips, M (2023)

programs in regional towns are prepared for new migrant settlement and are as effective, responsive, and efficient as possible.

- Coordination must be improved between all levels of government (from federal government to local councils), receiving communities, local organisations and settlement and service providers including to innovate and plan place-based solutions and innovations.
- Tailored, flexible responsive resources and services must be developed in rural and remote areas to increase the support available to young people who live there. As with young people who settle anywhere in Australia, it is important to take into consideration that the settlement needs of young people will differ from those of adults and children, and young people will need targeted, specialised support to assist in the navigation of their settlement journeys.