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Human Services Inquiry
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2, Collins Street East
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Submitted online: www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/human-services/identifying-reform

SCOA Submission to the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper - *Human Services: Identifying Sectors for Reform*

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Productivity Commission's public inquiry into human services reform.

SCOA is the national peak body for settlement, representing over 80 agencies providing settlement support services directly to people of refugee and migrant backgrounds across Australia. Our membership is comprised of the vast majority of organisations delivering federally funded settlement programs including: Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS), the Settlement Grants Program (SGP), Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS), Complex Case Support (CCS) and the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP).

This submission relates to both settlement services and the broad range of human services refugees and migrants access (e.g. housing, employment, health, disability) that are critical for their successful settlement.

The Settlement Sector has struck the right balance of competition and collaboration

The first stage of this inquiry aims to identify the human services that are best suited to increased application of competition, contestability and user choice.

Settlement services are already a sector with a competitive and contestable funding process and do not require further reform or investigation in this regard. The HSS, CCS, SRSS and AMEP programmes undergo a tender process, and SGP is funded through a competitive grants process. Further introduction of competition measures could be counterproductive to the Government's current objective to encourage collaboration amongst these service providers.

The broader aim of the inquiry is to improve human services provision, as measured by quality, equity, efficiency, accountability and responsiveness. The Department of Social Services (DSS) is currently reviewing settlement services and a recent evaluation concluded that, on the whole, these services are being delivered in a way that is highly efficient and effective. The DSS' evaluation report of the HSS and CCS programmes concluded:



HSS and CCS are appropriate, effective and efficient; they meet the Australian Government's overall policy objectives; they are managed efficiently with robust processes in place to achieve value for money and they have lasting impact upon client outcomes and their well-being.¹

SCOA believes that the strong performance of the settlement sector is in part due to the fact that the current system strikes the right balance with regard to competition and contestability. This has helped foster innovation and continuous improvement while also enabling collaboration and sharing of best practice.

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This model empowers users to make choices about the services they receive and works on the assumption that users are familiar with Australia's human services system. The users of settlement services are newly arrived to Australia and are not familiar with any services. Moreover, newly arrived migrants and refugees may face significant barriers to accessing information on services. These barriers include low levels of English literacy, lower levels of formal education, and complex mental and physical health issues.

These barriers, along with unfamiliar human services, systems and procedures, create a greater risk that some newly arrived migrants and refugees will not fully access and engage with the range of human services which they require and are eligible for. Settlement services exist to provide newly arrived refugees and migrants with specialised assistance to navigate Australia's human services system. An informed user choice model is not appropriate for people of refugee and migrant backgrounds and therefore should not be applied to settlement services.

The settlement services sector is, however, committed to improving its service provision through other avenues such as the recently launched National Settlement Services Outcomes Standards (NSSOS).² The NSSOS are a set of best-practice guidelines aimed at ensuring consistent, client-centred and outcomes focused settlement services across the country. They utilise a continuous improvement model which assists to stimulate innovation where appropriate. The NSSOS are available at:

http://www.scoa.org.au/resources/SCOA%20National%20Settlement%20Services%20Outcomes%20Standards%202016_final.pdf

¹ Department of Social Services 2015, *Evaluation of Humanitarian Settlement Services and Complex Case programmes*, <https://www.dss.gov.au/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/publications/evaluation-of-humanitarian-settlement-services-and-complex-case-support-programmes>

² SCOA 2016 National Settlement Services Outcomes Standards, <http://scoa.org.au/announcements/national-settlement-service-standards-project>



CALD communities must be considered when reforming other human services

The needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) individuals, including people of refugee and migrant background, must be taken into account when considering potential reform of human services. The Australian Government's Multicultural Access and Equity Policy acknowledges that all government programs and services are to be accessible, responsive and deliver equitable outcomes for all Australians regardless of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds³.

Caution should be taken to ensure human services systems are flexible enough to be responsive to the unique needs of CALD individuals. These services must be accessible, culturally competent, easy to navigate and have clear communication and referral pathways. This will also ensure service systems do not hinder the Government's objectives for the settlement of refugee and migrants. A lack of flexibility can lead to exclusion and poor outcomes in all settlement areas such as employment, housing and health.

Any human services reforms will need to take into account the connections between settlement services and mainstream human services. This connection is often undertaken through a process in which a settlement agency refers their client to a mainstream agency.

Settlement services and mainstream human services have developed complex relationships to ensure refugees and migrants receive the support they require. This is critical to successful settlement outcomes as many human services have limited capacity or expertise to address refugee and migrant's special needs. This problem and the need for settlement services and mainstream human service agencies to work closely together is captured in the experience of the following Settlement Worker:

"Some mainstream housing workers have no knowledge about refugees and where they came from before they arrived in Australia. I've had a housing worker ask me, "why does the government bring people like this client to Australia?" I was shocked. At first I thought, she's ignorant, but maybe there's limited resources to educate this person. This housing worker then asked me, "before refugees come to Australia don't they go to the internet to check what Australia offers?" I was really shocked and realised that some housing workers don't really understand the refugee experience⁴."

(Settlement worker)

Conclusion

Settlement services do not require further reform aimed at improving service provision through increased application of competition, contestability and user choice. These services are already

³ DSS 2016, *Multicultural Access and Equity*, <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/programs-policy/multicultural-access-and-equity>

⁴ Evans (2010).

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funded through a competitive and contestable process and have been recently found to be appropriate, effective and efficient. The sector is highly committed to a system wide process of continuous improvement and is committed to driving best practice and innovation through the ongoing implementation of the NSSOS.

It is also apparent that the connection of settlement services to other mainstream human services adds a layer of complexity that requires careful examination with regard to any potential reforms. The unique needs of newly arrived migrants and refugees require a flexible and responsive human services system. SCOA welcomes the opportunity to provide further input into this process if future reforms to mainstream human services occur.

SCOA thanks the Productivity Commission for considering this submission to its *Issues Paper - Human Services: Identifying Sectors for Reform*. If any further information is required please don't hesitate to contact me

Yours sincerely

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