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The Pacific Communities Council of Far North Queensland¹ welcomes the opportunity to participate in this process and contribute to this draft discussion paper. Our diverse community is made up of peoples from the Cook Islands, Nuie, Fiji, PNG, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, and New Zealand Maori.²

Many of our community members have come to Australia from New Zealand, frequently as New Zealand citizens. The impact of the Trans-Tasman Travel Agreement (TTTA) has therefore been significant. Our comments on the draft discussion paper are made in relation to this sub-set of the Pacific Island communities of Far North Queensland to whom the TTTA applies.

We support the Pacific Island Reference Group's engagement with the Productivity Commissions of Australia and New Zealand around this draft discussion paper.

We agree with the proposed initiatives in the paper to:

- 1) *DR4.17 Make information on eligibility for social supports readily available to New Zealand citizens planning to reside in Australia.*

We believe that provision of this information is critical to informing potential migrants of the full picture of what supports are and are not available, so they might be better prepared financially for the move.

¹**Vision Statement** - Working together to build loving, responsible and integrated Pacific Island Communities in Australia.

Objectives

1. Act as the Co-ordinating body and represent the collective interest for and concerns of the Pacific Communities in Far North Queensland.
2. To establish a Far North Queensland Pacific Centre.
3. To liaise, lobby and work in collaboration with Government and non government Agencies on settlement, health and welfare, education, employment, home storage, business, social, cultural, emotional and spiritual issues affecting our own Pacific Communities.
4. Establish links in dissemination of government information and facilitate communication with the Pacific Island countries, including New Zealand in the best interests of the Pacific Communities of Far North Queensland.
5. To promote Pacific Island Nations and New Zealand in Australia and encourage interchange of ideas ideologies, understanding of different cultures while achieving a better understanding of the diversity of cultures in Far North Queensland.

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² 2006 Census data 2% Queensland Population Pacific Islander – over 3,500 residents of Cairns – refer to

Our people share considerable burdens with NZ citizens arriving in Cairns as we provide support in all forms that is not otherwise available. Long term residents act as hosts for arriving families, providing ongoing financial, emotional and other support while they get settled and until they are eligible for government support and/or until they are self-sufficient. For example, housing families (which can lead to overcrowding putting tenancies at risk and contributing to ongoing mental stress), financial support including medical emergencies (due to ineligibility for Medicare, access to specialists etc). Supporting our people has a significant impact on our own financial well-being as well as mental health and family relationships.

At a recent *Multicultural Housing and Homelessness Forum* held in Cairns (20/6) 74% of participants were from Pacific Island communities and many raised concerns about the impact of restrictions on access to social support as a result of the TTTA. Hidden homelessness amongst the Pacific Island community was noted as a key Discussions also covered the increased vulnerability of families where agreements made to support the settling family, for housing, medical, financial and other support, fall apart for a range of reasons such as insufficient funds being saved before moving to Australia, lack of understanding of the restrictions on accessing social services, stress/tensions between the host and arrival family etc.

2) *DR 4.18 Finalise consideration of alternative potential pathways to Australian permanent residence and citizenship for New Zealand citizens.*

There is a clear rationale for providing a different way for New Zealand citizens to become permanent residents and citizens of Australia due to the special nature of the relationship between our countries. At the above mentioned housing forum, immigration processes were also identified as a significant issue, especially where one partner has citizenship and the other doesn't. We would welcome the development of an alternative citizenship/residency pathway.

Additional impacts of the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangements

We support the draft discussion papers proposal for further investigation of Australia's social security access limitations (4.6) as we continue to experience as a community the hardship these restrictions impose. Some of the impacts are mentioned above; however a particularly heavy burden is felt by young Pacific Islanders who do not have the opportunity to pursue tertiary education due to prohibitive costs (payment of TAFE and university fees as a foreign student, unable to access HECS/HELP). Young people need support and encouragement to progress with their education, not further barriers. Limitation of tertiary education options due to cost prohibitions has been linked to disengagement from the education system. This is a real and significant issue which requires more research and coordinated action. Initial research undertaken by the University of Queensland in partnership with Multilink provides a basis for further exploration.³

It should be noted that the Queensland Health response to the Maori and Pacific Island Health Assessment Needs identified the lack of access to social services support as a contributor to this groups' lower socio-economic status, potentially compounding a range of chronic and acute health issues through continuing disadvantage.⁴

³ Unpublished report

⁴ http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health_workers/gh-response-data.pdf p.6

Pacific Island Community Engagement

We support a strong engagement mechanism across Queensland that brings all Pacific Island communities together. We have been in discussions with the Pacific Island Reference Group around this proposal. For an effective governance structure to operate, engaging with local, State, Federal and New Zealand government agencies, funding and support will be required.

Access to data and information

To enable our community and support services to be prepared and to coordinate efforts to respond and meet peoples' needs, we need up to date, ongoing information about the numbers of Pacific Islander families arriving from New Zealand, or other relevant countries, as well as inter-state movements. Links between community organisations such as ourselves and immigration departments are crucial.

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