

## Mayoral Alliance for the Pacific and a ‘Re-imagined’ PALM Scheme

*Position Paper—November 2024*

**The Mayoral Alliance for the Pacific, co-founded by Welcoming Australia and Leeton Shire Council, aims to equip local councils to engage more effectively in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme and deliver better outcomes for communities, employers, and workers.**

The Alliance discusses, develops and promotes a cohesive local government voice centred on the benefits and challenges of the PALM Scheme to ensure better economic, social, and cultural outcomes for all community members. While collaboratively advocating for constructive solutions to “disengaged” workers, our collective voice seeks to amplify and enhance the likelihood of attaining win-win-win outcomes for workers, local communities, employers and diplomatic relations.

### **The PALM Scheme**

For rural Australia, the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme, which took effect on 4 April 2022, has been a vital source of workers. Businesses find recruiting low-to-medium-skilled agricultural workers, forklift workers, factory floor workers, and labourers increasingly challenging. Growing numbers of PALM workers are also engaged in aged care and health care settings. The PALM scheme helps close these workforce gaps, making PALM workers vital to local economic sustainability and growth. As of August 2024, [Australia hosts 30,805 PALM scheme workers stationed at 481 employers](#).

“Disengaged” describes PALM workers who leave the program for various reasons. The reasons may include workers being poached by employers on the promise of better pay and conditions or those who flee their workplaces due to exploitation. It should be noted that when workers officially request to transfer farms, it can take months to find a new placement—moreover, [stories of low pay, poor conditions and unsatisfactory housing plague the program](#).

The families of PALM workers who remain in the Pacific and Timor-Leste often face significant challenges. With many workers spending extended periods in Australia, [families back home—especially children left without one or both parents—experience considerable emotional strain](#). Additionally, long separations can lead to [complexities such as extra-marital relationships in Australia, sometimes resulting in unplanned pregnancies](#). Without Medicare access, these situations [impose severe financial and extensive social burdens](#).

Another pressing issue is that many PALM workers are highly skilled professionals in their home countries, such as police officers, teachers, and nurses. However, people often join the PALM scheme for higher wages, creating a significant “brain drain” that strains Pacific nations. This loss of skilled talent and the departure of workers from other sectors result in labour shortages across the region, [profoundly impacting their communities’ financial and social sustainability and well-being](#).

Rural and regional Australia and the Pacific nations involved both need and want the PALM scheme to succeed—and in many cases, it does. However, there is growing concern about the abovementioned issues and the increasing social and healthcare needs within the PALM community. These issues add responsibilities to local councils, who must address the related social and welfare outcomes.

### **PALM Future – Reimagining the Scheme**

As more PALM workers move and temporarily settle in regional and rural communities, more people-to-people links are being established for an aspirational united, connected and stronger Pacific ‘family’. However, this qualitative goal will remain illusory if program gaps are unresolved. The recommendations below reflect the recently released NSW Office of the Anti-Slavery Commissioner’s report titled [Be Our Guests: Addressing urgent modern slavery risks for temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales](#) and the previously released Federal Government’s [White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities](#).

## Recommended Actions

### 1. Inter-governmental liaison

**Action:** Develop and implement a consultative framework that ensures local governments and state and federal agencies are actively and routinely involved in program planning and delivery. This framework should incorporate regular feedback mechanisms, open communication channels for addressing concerns, and a structured process for co-designing policy and budget recommendations.

**Action:** The Australian Government should foster collaborative engagement with Welcoming Cities and the Mayoral Alliance for the Pacific through a cross-departmental approach to improve the support network for the PALM scheme and enhance community outcomes.

### 2. Prepared Employers

**Action:** Mandate approved and enhanced culturally responsive training for employers to foster positive workplace relationships and enhance employer-employee interactions.

**Action:** Encourage participation in the *Welcoming Workplaces* initiative to create inclusive work environments. Equally require PALM Approved Employers to be certified as “Employers of Choice” through the *Welcoming Workplaces* initiative.

**Action:** The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) should implement mandatory training on Australian labour laws for PALM scheme employers to ensure compliance and protect worker rights.

**Action:** Establish clear deliverables for Country Liaison Officers to ensure accountability and effective execution of the PALM deed, promoting genuine collaboration among stakeholders.

**Action:** Simplify the PALM Scheme's administrative structure and implement a proactive communication campaign to enhance stakeholder engagement.

**Action:** Resource local partners in regional communities to support employers and engage them on an ongoing basis to ensure they meet their commitments.

### 3. Proactive Visa Conditions

**Action:** Reapprove the current cohort of “disengaged” PALM workers for return into the scheme and support employers who extend them job offers. Additionally, this category should encompass disengaged workers who were misinformed and applied for protection or asylum.

**Action:** Revise visa conditions to support worker retention and integration, ensuring Australia meets its commitments to PALM workforce training, development, and community connections.

**Action:** Create flexible mechanisms and supportive policies that allow employees to change employers or employment locations as needed, ensuring PALM workers are not tied to a single employer.

**Action:** Ensure Departmental officers are regularly present on the ground and addressing regional issues with local partners

### 4. Coordinated Community Engagement

**Action:** Provide funding and resources to local organisations to establish regional migrant centre hubs to enhance support networks and monitoring conditions for PALM workers.

**Action:** Connecting Approved Employers with community services and facilities (churches, sports clubs, community groups) to support opportunities for PALM workers to engage with and participate in their local community using a place-based approach that is appropriately resourced.

## 5. Quality Accommodation Assurance

**Action:** DEWR to clarify the minimum standard for workers' accommodation across all industries engaged in the PALM Scheme.

**Action:** Empower and financially resource Host Councils (Local Governments) to assess and periodically monitor the quality of accommodation for PALM workers, promoting safe living conditions.

## 6. Prepared and Supported Workers

**Action:** Strengthen Australia's commitment to workers' countries of origin by facilitating pre-departure briefings, including training, providing information resources for families, and addressing challenges such as loneliness and community integration.

**Action:** Ensure and guarantee PALM workers have seamless access to Medicare and necessary healthcare supports, prioritising their health and well-being.

**Action:** Provide in-place resourcing to address the broad range of daily matters facing workers, employers, and the community. Current arrangements are not fit for purpose.