



Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration

Submission on Reforming Australia's Settlement Grants Programs

Social Enterprise Australia • October 2026

Response to Department of Home Affairs' *Discussion Paper: Reforming Australia's Settlement Grants Programs*, September 2026

About this submission

This submission was prepared by Social Enterprise Australia in consultation with the Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) Program Community of Practice and Social Enterprise Australia members. It builds on our January 2026 pre-Budget submission, prepared in collaboration with the 20 social enterprises delivering the EPRI Program, and informed by engagement with social economy,¹ settlement, employment, business, community and government stakeholders, refined through an evidence review and consultation.

Our submission speaks to the distinct and effective specialist contribution jobs-focused social enterprises make to settlement outcomes, and to the design conditions under which that contribution can continue and grow.

Participation and outcomes data are drawn from published EPRI Program Community of Practice material and Departmental data.

About us

Social Enterprise Australia is the national peak body for social enterprise. We're for an economy that puts people and the planet first – and for unlocking the power of social enterprise to help get us there. We connect, build and advocate for the sector, and coordinate its national strategy. We are a democratic, member-based organisation. Our direction is set by the sector, and we provide a bridge for it to partner with the Australian Government and others to grow impact.

We are a delivery partner of the Australian Government on the Social Enterprise Development Initiative (SEDI), and convene the Community of Practice for its Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) Program.

¹The social economy includes cooperatives, associations, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, self-help groups and other entities. See *The State of the Social Economy in Australia: Inaugural Summary Report 2025*, <https://www.csi.edu.au/research/the-social-economy-report/>.

The EPRI Program Community of Practice

Since June 2023, Social Enterprise Australia has convened the EPRI Program Community of Practice (CoP) to support the 20 EPRI Program Providers to connect, learn and act together, and with settlement and employment services and peak bodies, towards productivity and inclusion outcomes for participants, the wider economy and a socially cohesive Australia. The CoP seeks to:

- Strengthen EPRI Program collaborations that build collective capability and capacity, and work towards shared goals.
- Grow government and cross-sector understanding of the role, value-add and innovation potential of social enterprise as a collaborative partner in refugee settlement journeys.
- Advocate for policy, program, funding and system reform.

Since September 2026, the Settlement Council of Australia has participated as a standing guest, contributing to the CoP's discussions and to agenda-setting.

Learnings from the settlement, employment and social economy sectors point to the policy, practice and partnership reforms needed to grow an ecosystem of effective economic and social inclusion support for refugee and humanitarian entrants with low English language proficiency and/or low skill levels. Those learnings inform this submission.

The EPRI Program is delivered by:

Brotherhood of St Laurence · CERES Fair Wood · Civik People · Community Corporate · Loop Upcycling · Green Collect (and auspiced partner, the Dragonfly Collective with Value Nation) · Green Yakka · Multicultural Youth SA · Nundah Community Enterprises Cooperative · Parliament On King · Plate it Forward · Social Engine · STREAT · Space2b Social Design · The Bread & Butter Project · The Social Outfit · The Social Studio · Thrive Refugee Enterprise · Vinnies NSW · Whittlesea Community Connections.

Executive summary

The Department of Home Affairs is considering how it funds and delivers settlement support. The discussion paper proposes merging three programs – Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS), Youth Transition Support (YTS), and Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) – into a single integrated program. It names economic participation, social connections and youth pathways as the outcomes sought, and proposes these become the program streams.

Good settlement outcomes take a range of actors and contributions, and are enhanced when these work well together. This submission focuses on the distinct specialist contribution that jobs-focused social enterprise can and should make to settlement outcomes, and how this should connect in with other critical contributions.

Our core case is that jobs-focused social enterprises should remain, and grow their contribution, as specialist providers within the reformed settlement grants programs. Through the current EPRI Program, the Government funds 20 social enterprises to create pathways to employment and self-employment for refugee and humanitarian entrants with low English language proficiency and/or low recognised skill levels. Jobs-focused social enterprises are a distinct sub-category of social enterprise: they exist to create jobs

and pathways to employment and self-employment for people most shut out of work.² Their distinct contribution is that they integrate real work settings with support. The 2025 interim-evaluation of the Program, two years into implementation, found that without EPRI (or a similar) program, this cohort lacks the appropriate support to activate economic potential.³

Integration can strengthen that specialist model or dilute it. Social Enterprise Australia supports a more integrated model and the reform's stated objectives. The EPRI Program Community of Practice has long noted that settlement and employment programs are fragmented and siloed, that coordinators and participants may lack awareness of other relevant programs and how to access them, and that this results in limited coordination, disconnection and confusion for those seeking support. The Program interim-evaluation similarly found that on-ground settlement and employment services stakeholders and multicultural community organisations tended not to be aware of EPRI.⁴

We support the outcomes the discussion paper seeks, but not those outcomes becoming the program streams. Universal and generalist support of this cohort is needed, alongside effective specialist referral pathways. Multiple supports can and should contribute to the outcomes sought, and the design of the reformed program should encourage this. Taking the current EPRI Program as an example, while it makes a distinct and needed contribution to economic participation outcomes, it is not and should not be the only contributor to these. Further, it contributes to all three outcomes sought: alongside employment outcomes, participants report gains in community participation, networks and wellbeing – outcomes the discussion paper places under social connection. Consistent with the discussion paper's own design consideration of retaining the strengths of existing programs, we suggest the streams reflect and build on the strengths of current service delivery and address gaps. This would foster a person-centred approach in which multiple streams contribute to the outcomes sought.

Key messages

- **Jobs-focused social enterprise makes a distinct and needed contribution.** These enterprises uniquely provide wrap-around support in the context of real work settings, and create, curate or broker the job or employment pathway.⁵
- **They reach people the system otherwise misses.** More than 900 EPRI Program participants had been in Australia for over three years before the program engaged them, and AMEP data identifies more than 35,000 EPRI-eligible participants, at least 16,000 of whom have been here more than three years.⁶
- **The results are strong.** To November 2025, more than 3,300 participants engaged; more than 1,155 were employed or self-employed for at least 26 weeks; and more than 910 moved into open employment. SCORE data shows positive outcomes for 80–91% of assessed participants.⁷ For people experiencing significant labour market exclusion, research consistently shows that jobs-focused social enterprises produce better employment outcomes than support services acting alone.

²Social Enterprise Australia, *Australia's social enterprise strategy*, 2026, pp. 5, 9.

³Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 4.

⁴Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 21.

⁵Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, p. 6.

⁶DEX data (January 2023 – 30 June 2025) and AMEP data (1 June 2023 – 30 September 2025) provided by the Department of Home Affairs, as published in Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, p. 8.

⁷EPRI Program Community of Practice provider survey (program start to November 2025) and Department of Home Affairs SCORE data (January 2023 – 30 June 2025), as published in Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, pp. 7–8.

- **Impact costs must be funded.** The extra costs of creating and sustaining work for people facing significant barriers cannot be covered by trade revenue alone. The interim-evaluation found the capacity EPRI Program Providers have built will likely dissipate without ongoing funding.⁸
- **Integrate the architecture, not the capability.** Integration should mean linked generalist and specialist streams connected by shared eligibility, intake, referral and measurement.
- **Collaboration needs resourcing.** Merging programs does not by itself produce collaboration. As the interim-evaluation noted, good collaboration takes additional resources, and this needs to be funded.⁹

Our recommendations

Recommendation	Responds to
1. Extend EPRI service delivery as an enduring specialist stream, with greater coverage of locations of refugee settlement and regional development, and early notification and management of continuation.	Q1 Service design Q2 Targeting and access Q3 Service delivery and outcomes
2. Develop collaboration infrastructure and co-design a settlement and employment partnerships Hub.	Q3 Service delivery and outcomes Q1 Service design

Together, these recommendations would strengthen settlement outcomes for refugee and humanitarian entrants – including safety, wellbeing and dignity at work – build collective provider capability, enable robust evaluation and learning, and better connect settlement and employment systems. They are underpinned by the 2025 interim-evaluation and by the insights, case studies and participant impact stories published by the EPRI Program Community of Practice.¹⁰

Why jobs-focused social enterprises should remain providers

Research shows that employment for refugee and humanitarian entrants within the first five years post-arrival is linked to financial security, lower reliance on social assistance and a stronger sense of belonging, and that prolonged unemployment can erode skills, earnings, job quality and social inclusion. Delayed or missed pathways to work come at a high cost to government, to refugee and humanitarian entrants, and to the broader community. Jobs-focused social enterprises provide a distinct and effective way to help close that gap, which is why we recommend keeping them as specialist providers and strengthening their role in a reformed system.

⁸Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 4.

⁹Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 5 (Recommendations 2 and 3).

¹⁰Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025; *EPRI Program Case Studies*, 2025; *EPRI Program Insights and Impact Stories*, 2026.

1. They integrate support with real work settings

Jobs-focused social enterprises not only prepare people for work. They integrate support with real work settings, and create, curate and/or broker jobs as well.¹¹ They carry the risk of a first Australian work experience in their own operations, and maintain the relationship after a participant moves into open employment. In communities with too few jobs, they create new ones.

That capability rests on a trading business, employer relationships built over years, staff experienced in working with the cohort, and a board prepared to carry commercial risk for social purpose.

2. They achieve better outcomes for people most excluded from work

For people experiencing significant labour market exclusion, research consistently shows that jobs-focused social enterprises produce better employment outcomes than support services acting alone. They combine real work settings with structured development and wrap-around support; they prevent and address long-term unemployment; and they influence mainstream employers to be more inclusive, building employer capability and creating pathways into mainstream work.¹²

The EPRI pilot Program demonstrates this for refugee and humanitarian entrants. A provider survey by the EPRI Program Community of Practice identified the following, from the start of implementation to November 2025:¹³

- More than 3,300 participants engaged, and more than 2,840 completed pre-employment training for job readiness or self-employment / small business startup readiness.
- More than 1,065 completed at least six weeks' work experience (paid/unpaid), and more than 570 gained an accredited certificate.
- More than 1,155 were employed or self-employed for at least 26 weeks, and more than 910 transitioned to open employment.
- More than 165 secured a part-time or full-time role within an EPRI social enterprise, and more than 780 engaged in confidence-building and social participation supports.

SCORE data for January 2023 to June 2025 records positive outcomes for 91.4% of 1,453 participants assessed under the Goals Assessment; 87.3% of 1,493 under the Circumstances Assessment; 79.6% of 1,477 under the Employment domain; and 83.8% of 1,293 under the Education & Skills Training domain.¹⁴ Other domains also improved despite not being a direct program target – notably financial resilience, community participation and networks, and mental health and wellbeing.

3. They reach people other services have not

More than 1,100 EPRI Program participants had been in Australia for one to three years, and more than 900 for over three years, when they entered the program.¹⁵ AMEP data identifies 35,497 EPRI-eligible

¹¹Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, p. 6.

¹²Australia's social enterprise strategy, 2026, p. 9 (Access to decent work); Social Enterprise Australia, *Shaping the Future of Employment Services: Submission Guide for social enterprise advocates and supporters*, July 2026, p. 4.

¹³EPRI Program Community of Practice provider survey, as published in Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, pp. 7–8. Different models of employment and self-employment pathways may mean differing interpretations applied to outcomes and associated figures.

¹⁴SCORE data provided by the Department of Home Affairs for January 2023 – 30 June 2025, as published in Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, p. 8.

¹⁵DEX data provided by the Department of Home Affairs for January 2023 – 30 June 2025, as published in Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, p. 8.

participants from June 2023 to September 2025, at least 16,000 of whom have been in Australia for more than three years, and 13,000 of whom have been in the AMEP for more than three years.¹⁶ Several thousand people already resident for years, and already engaged with the mainstream English program, had not been connected to an economic participation pathway before the EPRI Program reached them. We recommend that time since arrival be built into the targeting and outcomes measurement of any integrated program.

4. Their capacity is still being built, and depends on impact costs being funded

Jobs-focused social enterprises earn revenue by selling goods and services in the market – that is their business model. But, unlike commercially focused businesses, they are purpose-first. And delivering employment outcomes for people facing significant barriers costs more than running an equivalent commercial business. These additional costs are called **impact costs**, and they cannot sustainably be funded through trade revenue alone. Impact costs include: staffing the additional supports provided to target employees; higher rates of leave and absenteeism and the hours-of-work limitations of some employees; higher turnover in transitional models; additional staff to compensate for less experienced, qualified and/or efficient employees; and engagement with the wider ecosystem.¹⁷

The EPRI Program grows the number and scale of social enterprises contributing to economic participation outcomes because it funds impact costs. The interim-evaluation found the program increased short-term provider capacity, and that this uplift will likely dissipate without ongoing funding – largely due to the impact costs of supporting people with low English skills.¹⁸ Dedicated social enterprise capacity for refugee and humanitarian economic participation is still being built, and will not be built or sustained without ongoing dedicated funding.

5. The interim-evaluation supports continuing and strengthening the model

The 2025 interim-evaluation found an ongoing need for specific employment support for refugee and humanitarian entrants. It recognised the ecosystem of capabilities, referral networks and specialised employment pathways developed through EPRI and noted that this – together with the education, training, English language, digital literacy, technical skills and employment outcomes achieved – supports continuation of the program.¹⁹ Among its recommendations were:²⁰

- Funding EPRI as a learning model, with continued Department of Home Affairs ownership in the short term to ensure strong links to the settlement sector are maintained.
- Funding mechanisms that support collaboration rather than competition, and that reflect the additional effort needed to collaborate across sectors.
- Provider selection that reflects specialisation, combining larger social enterprises servicing multiple locations with smaller, intensive place-based models, and including employer support and access to capital.

The interim-evaluation also pointed to Workforce Australia as a potential long-term home for EPRI. However, it notes that medium-long term outcomes need to be proven first, for EPRI and for Workforce Australia itself, and recommends learnings within the Department of Home Affairs come first and inform this decision. It

¹⁶AMEP data provided by the Department of Home Affairs for EPRI visa-eligible clients from 1 June 2023 – 30 September 2025 with less than vocational English language proficiency, as published in Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, p. 8.

¹⁷Social Enterprise Australia, *Shaping the Future of Employment Services: Submission Guide for social enterprise advocates and supporters*, July 2026, pp. 3–7.

¹⁸Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 4.

¹⁹Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, pp. 45, 50.

²⁰Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, pp. 4–6.

also found that specialist EPRI support (or a program like it) would still be needed as refugees can only join Workforce Australia voluntarily in their first 12 months, with little employment focus offered and after which mutual obligations apply; and its CALD and refugee specialist providers advise they lack the funding to offer the holistic, wraparound support that is characteristic of specialist provider models.²¹

6. Naming social enterprise in the design

The discussion paper does not refer to social enterprise as a delivery model. That is understandable as the paper is concerned with future service design rather than with assessing existing programs. But a design that does not name and resource a capability is unlikely to preserve it. Retaining jobs-focused social enterprises means naming them as a specialist delivery model in program design, guidelines and provider selection, and giving them a distinctly funded stream.

Currently, EPRI service delivery and outcomes are constrained. They can reach more participants who need them by extending their reach – to more locations of refugee settlement and regional development, and to the people current eligibility rules exclude – and connecting them properly to the rest of the system, so specialist delivery is part of an integrated pathway rather than separate from it. Recommendations 1 and 2 set out how.

Service design conditions

Consultation Question 1:

How could settlement support services achieve strong economic participation, social connection and youth outcomes?

Integrate the architecture, not the capability

We support an integrated model that improves participant navigation, referral, reporting and accountability. The discussion paper does not yet define what integration would mean in practice, and the answer matters. We support integration where it means linked streams connected by shared eligibility, intake, referral and measurement. We support the retention of specialist jobs-focused social enterprise providers. We do not support replacing a mix of connected specialist supports with only generalist settlement and/or employment support.

A specialist jobs-focused social enterprise stream does not run counter to seamless support. It is what a person with high barriers to work is referred to, to make economic participation and other outcomes achievable. A diverse cohort needs diverse pathways: specialist jobs-focused social enterprise providers are small and large, local and national, regional and metropolitan, and offer work experience, job creation, supported, brokered and self-employment pathways across a broad range of industries.²²

Seamless support across streams

Seamless support for participants with needs across multiple streams depends on three things a merged funding envelope does not create by itself: a single eligibility architecture, noting subsets within it may be used for cohort-specific referral pathways; integrated intake and assessment; and a documented two-way

²¹Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, pp. 47-48.

²²EPRI Program Case Studies, 2025, Introduction; EPRI Program Insights and Impact Stories, 2026, Key Policy Insights.

referral pathway between streams. Without these, a participant will continue to be assessed separately for each stream, and to retell their story each time they move between services.

A clear handover model would help. Generalist settlement services are best placed to meet initial settlement needs and identify people for employment pathways. Indeed, the interim-evaluation recommended sitting recruitment in the settlement sector, with a matching mechanism outside individual providers.²³ Specialist employment providers can then build on that relationship rather than replace it. Involving them early also helps people make better-informed decisions: for example, EPRI Program Providers have verbally noted examples of participants moving for cheaper housing, away from jobs and transport.

Build learning and outcome measurement into the design

The discussion paper asks how outcomes are defined and measured. DEX and SCORE are designed for reporting across many programs. They capture useful information but miss much of what matters in specialist social enterprise settings.²⁴ We recommend the specialist stream measure:

- **Progression towards work** – pre-employment training, skills, English language and confidence gains, recognised as outcomes in their own right, with activation defined against participant goals rather than a set timeframe.²⁵
- **Durability and progression in work** – sustained employment at 26 weeks and beyond, growth in hours and earnings, and the transition from supported to open employment.
- **Self-employment and enterprise creation** – with safeguards so participants are not channelled into low-margin or precarious self-employment as a substitute for fair and secure work.
- **Safety, wellbeing and dignity in work** – including intentional support to reduce workplace exploitation, racial discrimination and modern slavery.
- **Differentiated value-add by sub-group** – by age, gender, literacy and education level, and family, cultural and caring responsibilities, so the system can see what works for whom.
- **Qualitative and narrative evidence** – including self-determined, culturally sensitive story-sharing by participants on goals, circumstances and most significant change.

Fit-for-purpose monitoring and learning platforms should be trialled alongside DEX, that make meaningful, appropriate, real-time data visible to participants and providers as well as government.

Alignment with the outcomes framework

The Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework focuses on self-efficacy and self-agency. Specialist jobs-focused social enterprises build both. Participants make their own choices about work, learn how Australian workplaces operate and gain the confidence to pursue their goals. The program also shows what's needed in the wider system, including employers ready and able to hire and a more connected system.²⁶

²³Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 5 (Recommendations 6 and 7).

²⁴EPRI Program Case Studies, 2025, Learnings for improved program settings. p. 4

²⁵Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, pp. 5–6 (Recommendations 8–10).

²⁶Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, p. 10 and Appendix A.

Targeting and access conditions

Consultation Question 2:

How can services ensure support is accessible, equitable and directed to those with the greatest settlement needs?

Align eligibility and intake across the streams

Narrow eligibility criteria mean many refugee and humanitarian entrants referred from settlement or employment services, and who would benefit from an EPRI-like program, are currently ineligible for EPRI support. Eligibility has been a long-standing barrier, and the interim-evaluation recommended aligning EPRI eligibility with SETS visa categories to enable smoother referral.²⁷

If an integrated program carries forward three inherited sets of eligibility rules under a single banner, navigation will have improved without the pathway improving. We recommend the design begin from a single eligibility architecture, so that a person eligible for any stream can be referred into specialist economic participation support, with holistic recruitment, intake and assessment so participants are not assessed multiple times.

Responding to different cohorts

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to economic participation for this cohort. Specialist jobs-focused social enterprises deliver differentiated models for women, young people, mature-age men with low English and low recognised skills, people with limited literacy in their first language, and people with caring responsibilities. Community-based and cooperative enterprise models are particularly valuable for those at high risk of social and economic exclusion – including women with low literacy, limited formal education or employment experience, and high social isolation – because they offer culturally safe, community-connected and flexible pathways to income, confidence, skills and social participation.²⁸

Equitable engagement of community mobilisers, bicultural workers and refugee-led organisations should be recognised as a workforce asset and resourced accordingly.

Locations of refugee settlement and regional development

The determining factor in regional and remote delivery is a local employer base and an organisation connected to it. Place-based social enterprises work in jobs-poor communities often to increase the availability of jobs rather than rely on competition for existing vacancies.

A per-participant funding model derived from metropolitan volumes will not sustain that capability, because impact costs do not fall in proportion to participant numbers. We recommend greater coverage of locations of refugee settlement and regional development, with a viability floor for regional and remote delivery, consistent with the interim-evaluation's recommendation that the program operate in regional as well as metropolitan areas.²⁹ Where specialist providers are few, shared local infrastructure – such as co-delivered training and common recruitment pathways – would reduce the cost to each.

²⁷Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 6 (Recommendation 13); *EPRI Program Case Studies*, 2025, Learnings for improved program settings. p. 4

²⁸EPRI Program *Insights and Impact Stories*, 2026, Key Practice Insights. p. 9

²⁹Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 6 (Recommendation 13).

Service delivery, collaboration and outcome conditions

Consultation Question 3:

What service delivery approaches would best support long-term settlement outcomes and value for money?

Merging programs does not by itself produce collaboration

Integration is a change to funding architecture; collaboration is a change to practice. Providers in different streams of one program can be as disconnected as providers in different programs, because what connects them is not shared funding. It is shared referral pathways, a shared understanding of what each contributes, a forum in which they meet, and shared measurement that makes a joint outcome visible to both.

The interim-evaluation put it directly: *“Good collaboration between sectors takes additional resources and this [should] be explicitly considered in funding.”*³⁰ Collaboration can be embedded and incentivised by:

- **Funding it** – identifying a proportion of program funding as collaboration infrastructure, and making collaboration a funded expectation in grant agreements.
- **Measuring it** – shifting from fixed KPIs and transactional outputs towards measures of collaboration, adaptation, innovation and safe, sustained work and wellbeing, so a participant referred from one stream and employed through another is recorded as a shared outcome.³¹
- **Contracting for it** – moving from short-term grants to longer-term relational contracting that allows for experimentation, co-design and iteration, consistent with the Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee's call for *“a relational contracting approach to shift government's role from contract manager to active participant and steward”*.³²

Reducing duplication and improving participant pathways

EPRI Program Providers have verbally advised that their experience is that specialist offers are largely distinct: some settlement services have employment focused staff and some do not, creating both gaps and duplication. Duplication is best reduced by making each provider's contribution visible and connecting it – through integrated intake, a matching mechanism outside individual providers, and shared referral pathways – rather than by consolidating delivery into fewer, more generalist providers.

Coordination with employment and other settlement programs

Specialist jobs-focused social enterprise providers complement universal settlement and employment services, to support positive settlement outcomes. The current EPRI Program reaches people who are not accessing or well served by mainstream employment services. Published participant journeys record people who were not actively supported into work during a first-year exemption from mutual obligations, and who self-referred into EPRI because no other pathway had reached them.³³ The interim-evaluation found Workforce Australia services were typically not part of specialist EPRI Providers' networks.³⁴

³⁰Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 5 (Recommendations 2 and 3).

³¹EPRI Program Case Studies, 2025, Learnings for improved program settings; EPRI Program Insights and Impact Stories, 2026, Key System Insights. p. 10

³²Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee, *2025 Report to Government*. p. 18

³³EPRI Program Insights and Impact Stories, 2026, participant journeys. Names in source publication were changed at participants' request.

³⁴Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 21.

Stronger coordination needs a defined interface – shared eligibility information, a two-way referral pathway and visibility of specialist provision – with Workforce Australia and Inclusive Employment Australia, and with the Humanitarian Settlement Program, the Adult Migrant English Program and the Australian Cultural Orientation Program. Although those settlement programs sit outside the scope of this consultation, the interface with them shapes whether participant pathways improve.

Employment services are being reformed at the same time. The two reforms should be designed to connect, so refugee and humanitarian entrants can move between specialist settlement support and mainstream employment services without losing the support that got them work-ready.

Collaboration infrastructure and stewardship

Because the proposed Settlement Grants Program outcomes straddle the settlement, employment and social economy sectors, effective cross-program and cross-sector collaboration infrastructure is required – including co-design of a settlement and employment partnerships Hub to connect stakeholders and develop a whole-of-government approach to social and economic inclusion (Recommendation 2).³⁵

That infrastructure should be stewarded, led or co-led by organisations independent of service providers – to build trust, avoid probity and conflict-of-interest issues, and connect a diversity of specialist and generalist providers, including place-based providers strengthening local economies.³⁶ Stewards should: apply a system-wide lens to evidence-building; be accountable to a broad range of settlement, social economy and employment actors, including community-based organisations that do not receive government funds; embed lived experience leadership; and draw on existing centres for evidence and collaboration (such as the Centre for Inclusive Employment, funded by the Department of Social Services).

An integrated program is also an opportunity for the Department of Home Affairs to take a system steward approach – shifting from procurement of services and monitoring of outputs towards a role as ecosystem convenor and learning partner with shared accountability for outcomes.³⁷

Delivery by organisations with established local links

National consistency and community responsiveness are best balanced at different layers rather than traded against one another. Consistency belongs in the standards, outcome definitions and eligibility rules; responsiveness belongs in delivery. EPRI Program Providers vary in size, industry, location and model, and that diversity is why the program reaches sub-groups a single model would miss. They hold established relationships with settlement agencies, refugee-led organisations, local councils, social economy networks, employment services and employers. Standardising delivery models would reduce the local connectedness and social capital the discussion paper identifies as valuable.

Value for money

Value for money is not the same as price. It should take account of the public savings and value generated. The interim-evaluation found that the cost to deliver outcomes varied by provider, reflecting that some models are more resource-intensive; that the lower end of provider costs is competitive with other

³⁵Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, p. 10 and Recommendation 2.

³⁶EPRI Program Insights and Impact Stories, 2026, Key System Insights, p. 10; Social Enterprise Australia, *Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration: Requests of the Australian Government* (2026 pre-Budget submission), January 2026, Recommendation 2.

³⁷EPRI Program Insights and Impact Stories, 2026, Key System Insights, p. 10

programs; and that if the program demonstrates more sustainable outcomes, as early findings suggest, it will represent a value-for-money option for government.³⁸

Recommendations

Our recommendations respond to the priorities of the Refugee and Humanitarian Entrant Settlement and Integration Outcomes Framework, and to the Office for Multicultural Affairs' commitment that all people, regardless of cultural and linguistic background, should have the opportunity to participate fully in the community, contribute meaningfully to our society and feel they belong.

Recommendation 1

Extend EPRI service delivery as an enduring specialist stream, with greater coverage of locations of refugee settlement and regional development, and early notification and management of continuation.

We recommend that jobs-focused social enterprises remain specialist EPRI Providers within the integrated program, through a stream that has:

- **Distinct funding** – a specific allocation to retain and build market capacity and grow coverage.
- **Specialist delivery** – by jobs-focused social enterprises, named as a specialist delivery model in program design, guidelines and provider selection.
- **A home in the Department of Home Affairs** – as the interim-evaluation recommended at this stage,³⁹ to build capacity for this cohort.

Early notice and management of continuation are critical

Current agreements end in June 2027, before a reformed program can realistically be commissioned. The most time-critical element is early notice that this specialised stream will continue through and into the transition. **We ask that this be confirmed by the end of 2026.** Without it, many EPRI Program Providers will need to close or reduce intake and staffing. Early notice will:

- Minimise disruption of participant recruitment, induction, employment and support.
- Prevent loss of program staff and their relationships with participants, target communities, settlement services and employment partners.
- Enable providers to contribute to the design of the integrated program while continuing to deliver the present one.

³⁸Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 4.

³⁹Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 5 (Recommendation 4).

We are not asking the Department to pre-commit to a service model this consultation exists to settle. We are asking that current EPRI providers are enabled to continue to serve participants through the transition - so refugee and humanitarian entrants aren't negatively impacted, and so that the capability the reform intends to build on is still in place when the new arrangements begin.

Strengthened, not unchanged

The stream should retain what the EPRI Program has shown works – diverse, place-based models; vocational English combined with real work experience; employer engagement; and safety, wellbeing, dignity and a human-rights approach as core principles. It should evolve where the pilot has shown the need:

- **Aligned eligibility** with SETS visa categories,⁴⁰ and holistic recruitment, intake and assessment so participants aren't assessed multiple times.
- **Greater coverage** of locations of refugee settlement and regional development, with a viability floor for regional and remote delivery.
- **Growth in provider capacity** – a mix of larger multi-site and smaller place-based social enterprises, with employer support⁴¹ and access to capital, and a focus on occupations in persistent shortage.
- **Value, not price** – assessed on public savings and value being greater than the cost of covering impact costs.
- **Learning and outcome measurement built into design** – so the second evaluation's findings and ongoing outcome measurement inform the program.

Recommendation 2

Develop collaboration infrastructure and co-design a settlement and employment partnerships Hub.

We recommend the integrated program identify and fund collaboration infrastructure across three layers: among providers in a stream; between the streams of the settlement grants program; and with other relevant programs and sectors through a co-designed settlement and employment partnerships Hub. It should build on what exists, be stewarded independently of service delivery, and include:

- **Rigorous outcomes measurement** at provider, program and system levels, including self-determined, culturally sensitive story-sharing by participants.

⁴⁰Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 6 (Recommendation 13).

⁴¹Whereto Research, *Report: Evaluation of Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration (EPRI) program*, 2025, p. 6 (Recommendation 15).

- **Communities of practice**, building on the existing EPRI and SETS communities of practice, alongside cross-program research and cross-sector networks, so what works for which sub-group is shared, not continuously re-learned.
- **Integrated intake, assessment and referral** across streams, with a defined interface with the Humanitarian Settlement Program, the Adult Migrant English Program, the Australian Cultural Orientation Program, Workforce Australia and Inclusive Employment Australia.
- **Collaboration as a funded expectation** in grant agreements, measured as a shared outcome, with longer-term relational contracting.

A successful Hub should

- Ensure lived experience guides design and implementation.
- Support equitable engagement of community mobilisers from EPRI Program cohorts, recognised and paid as part of delivery.
- Activate employer engagement and inclusive workplace capability-development.
- Connect social enterprises, settlement organisations, generalist employment service providers and employers.
- Avoid duplication of effort and resources.

Social Enterprise Australia is the national peak body for social enterprise. We're for an economy that puts people and the planet first, and for unlocking the power of social enterprise to help get us there.

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