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SB/DH



7th March 2023

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Secretary,

MIGRATION, PATHWAY TO NATION
BUILDING SUBMISSION – SWAN HILL RURAL CITY COUNCIL

Swan Hill Rural City Council welcomes the opportunity provided by the Joint Standing Committee on Migration to be able to make a submission on the issue of Migration, Pathway to Nation Building.

Council believes that it is extremely important that a strategic plan to address the issues being faced by migrants wishing to settle in Australia is developed. More importantly, any such plan should address the needs of all levels of Government, Support Services providers and communities that wish to welcome migrants into their region, and the migrants themselves.

Council has reviewed the Joint Standing Committee's Terms of Reference and makes its submission in the context of both Terms of Reference and what it believes to be required to ensure that the systems put in place are workable.

SWAN HILL RURAL CITY COUNCIL BACKGROUND:

Swan Hill Rural City Council covers a vast expanse of land mass in North West Victoria (over 6000 square kms) and has a population increasing toward 22,000 people, with Swan Hill as the largest population centre and smaller communities spread across the Municipality.

The Municipality is located on the Murray River, with Swan Hill acting as a large Regional Service Centre for people on both sides of the River. This location also creates special circumstances for Governments and Service providers in supporting not only the local community but those that are visiting the region for work, daily living activities or leisure.

Swan Hill Rural City Council is located in a pivotal location when accessing Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide however the distances from the major capital centres also presents challenges when attracting migrants to settle in our region.

According to REMPLAN's independent statistics, the Municipality has around 10,500 jobs and seasonally sees this figure grow much higher, as the horticulture and agriculture industries seek workers to undertake the labour intensive work. Agriculture comprises of 20.33% of the total economic output valued at \$3.02 Billion.

An example of the population growth is illustrated by the official Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2021 Census data for the township of Robinvale is put at approximately 3,740 people. However, Council studies estimate a true population to be closer to 8,500 people. This is due to the need for migrant seasonal workers, noting that this figure is likely to be all year round rather than seasonal.

At the height of the seasonal work there are as many 6000 temporary workers within the Region annually across the Swan Hill Rural City Council Municipality. This figure is likely to grow with the continued expansion of the traditional industries, value adding associated with agriculture and horticulture together with the emergence of new industries on both sides of the Murray River, in particular mining.

It is likely that the Region will require upwards of 25,000 temporary migrants or workers to meet the growing demand and this will occur quickly.

The Municipality is also in desperate need of skilled migrant workers in a variety of industries ranging from health, manufacturing, building, engineering, project management and hospitality with the local economy and business impacted by the inability to attract workers to the region on an ongoing basis.

Council acts as a skilled migration certifying agent, works very closely with service providers who are supporting migrants and temporary workers arriving in our Municipality, is actively involved in the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) Scheme and has been seeking to establish a Designated Area Migration Agreement (DAMA) with neighbouring Councils on both sides of the Murray River.

Swan Hill Rural City Council acknowledges the importance of migration to our Country and in particular the positive impact migrants can have on the community bringing not only population growth but cultural diversity together with much needed work skills.

Council has worked to support cultural diversity through events such as Harmony Day, placed migrant groups in need of meeting facilities in Council owned buildings and worked to ensure that social inclusion is a high priority within its strategic documents and direction.

RESPONSE TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE'S TERMS OF REFERENCE:

1. The role of permanent migration in nation building, cultural diversity and social cohesion.

Historically our Nation has been served well as a result of the influx of migrants to our country which has allowed for population to continue to grow, new skills and

businesses established and importantly the introduction of new cultures to our social fabric.

We have been welcoming and embraced people who have migrated to our Country with Australian Citizenship Ceremonies very much a part of how Local Government is involved in the process.

There is a corresponding negative impact when migrant numbers reduce, as evidenced by the current situation caused in part by the COVID Pandemic, when migration numbers decrease, along with the severely reduced annual influx of seasonal workers. A variety of industries are experiencing the loss of traditional migrant work forces and communities not achieving the population growth associated with migrants settling within both metropolitan and regional locations.

The recent return of migrant workers to our region is positive and the different nationalities that are within our community have been welcomed for the diversity they bring to our region.

Community organisations are benefitting from the influx of migrants however there needs to be certainty given so that our newest citizens can continue to make a lasting contribution to the history of our Municipality.

Council purports it to be unacceptable that people, who might be on temporary working or migrant visas, should have to go through extended periods of uncertainty about their future, or indeed whether they can look to a future, whereby they are joined by family members.

The process to consider such applications is lengthy and any recommendations coming out of this inquiry should be strongly advocating for a reduction waiting and processing times. Some examples as extracted from the Department of Home Affairs website (3 March 2023);

Applications Processed	Visa Name	Subclass	Month to Process	Years to Process	Note
90%	Regional Sponsored Migration	187	60	5	
90%	Partner	100	31	Greater than 2.5	Must have Provisional visa (subclass 309) first
90%	Child	101	19	Greater than 1.5	
90%	Skilled – Nominated	190	36	3.0	
90%	Partner Provisional	309	30	2.5	Waiting for Permanent to be processed
90%	Temporary Work	403	Less than 1		PALMS
90%	Temporary Skills Shortage	482 (5 streams)	1-5	<0.5	Short (2yrs), medium (4yrs), labour agreement, nomination, sponsorship

<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-processing-times/global-visa-processing-times>

Migrants and Seasonal Workers within our Municipality are making a valuable contribution to our community and the Migration should be supporting them to be able to settle in our Country and Region faster.

The Federal Government should be allocating sufficient resources to ensure that this happens and work to simplify the migration process by reviewing all of the various visa categories so that people may be eligible to apply for permanent residency.

2. Immigration as a strategic enabler of vibrant economies and socially sustainable communities in our cities and regional hubs.

If our Nation is to continue to experience population growth, then a reliance solely on increased birth rates will not achieve this outcome as it is also a well-known fact that Australia is an ageing society, birth rates are decreasing and therefore emphasises the need for an expanded migration program all the more important.

There are significant pressures in obtaining the necessary skills within our workforces and this is a situation is faced in our Capital cities but is even more so difficult in a region such as the Swan Hill Rural City Council Municipality.

Without migration the economy of the Municipality will continue to suffer as businesses will not be able to source staff and there will be the inevitable downturn in business prosperity. Our Municipality needs to be able to take advantage of people with both professional skills and semi-professional skills, who want to make a new life in our Country and the migration system must be an enabler not seen as a difficult impediment with long drawn out processes that ultimately discourage migrants.


Working with Local Governments, the Federal Government should be identifying and highlighting opportunities for migrants wishing to take up work and then matching them with regions.

Local Government could be providing information about the Municipality including location, support services, existing ethnic communities and employment opportunities so that we can play a positive role in attracting migrants to our region.

With an influx of new migrants, local economies will benefit as a result of the need to construct new homes and within Swan Hill Rural City Council we have seen migrants take up new business opportunities by opening supermarkets and restaurants to service the different cultural needs not already within townships.

The Federal Government might consider additional support for migrants wishing to establish businesses by again working with Local Government to mentor migrants with advice and some level of financial support. This could be achieve firstly as a pilot program in a number of regions and if successful could be introduced on a wider scale.

Many migrants have a wide variety of skills that could be utilised with the business sector and encouragement given to continue with pursuing business opportunities should be provided.



Already many of seasonal workers and temporary migrants have demonstrated a willingness to become a part of our community in volunteer roles, joining community organisations and establishing support services for various cultural communities that are seeing an increase in numbers.

Governments at all levels should continue to look at positive programs of support for migrants and increase the level of communication amongst Government agencies to support individuals and organisations who are working with migrants and seasonal workers.

3. Attraction and retention strategies for working migrants.

It is evident from the high number of seasonal workers from a variety of cultural backgrounds that already are working within the Municipality, that our region does offer an attractive work choice which is increasing to year round activities and a community that is embracing the cultural diversity.

The region is a part of the PALM Scheme and has numerous employment agencies that are working with local industry leaders to ensure that there is a workforce available to take up positions.

The influx of workers is not without its challenges and additional on-ground support is needed for seasonal workers coming into our region.

Limited housing continues to be a significant issue for seasonal workers. Our community does not wish to see seasonal workers exploited through the provision of poor accommodation at highly inflated prices.

Support service providers are reporting of instances this type of exploitation is occurring and access to basic services such as health and pastoral care are extremely important. There is a trend where family groups rather than individual family members are coming to access work and there needs are going to be significantly different to that of a single person.

There must be greater communication between all levels of Government to ensure that everyone is aware;

- when seasonal workers are going to be coming to our region
- of where they are going to be located
- of their cultural backgrounds; and
- if there are family groups not only individuals

This will assist Local Councils and Support Service providers to have plans in place prior to the arrival of the workers rather than a couple days after they have arrived and they are experiencing problems.

Access to transport is a critical need as not all seasonal workers have the means to access transport. Swan Hill Rural City Council is currently involved in a bus trial project

with the Victorian State Government which provides subsidised transport for seasonal workers to particular work sites.

This is in addition to companies providing transport to enable workers to attend their workplace and the Federal Government should be looking at supporting transport programs as a way attracting additional workers by working with Local Council's and transport needs and opportunities.

Further support for seasonal workers after hours and on weekends should be investigated. Whilst many seasonal workers are looking to join local community groups, it is evident that retaining a cultural and spiritual connection back to their own communities is extremely important to them.

Isolation from family and friends can have a significant impact on workers and therefore connecting them with other workers from their cultural background is important.

Greater support for assisting seasonal workers in undertaking daily activities such as shopping, medical appointments and banking needs to be considered. Support Service providers continually receiving requests for assistance and many seasonal workers also seek out the support of local church groups.

4. Policy settings to strengthen skilled migrant pathways to permanent residency.

Our Nation and Regions need an ongoing process that allows skilled migrants and seasonal workers the opportunity to make a decision to commit to settling in our Country on a permanent basis, but such a process should not be long and difficult to achieve an outcome.

We need many of the skills that migrants have to offer and the Federal Government should invest in these skills by adequately resourcing the current processing system to reduce waiting times.

It should be the aim of policy to embrace migrants and to minimise separation from family members, as the current system can years to reunite families.

A review of the various visa categories with a view to reducing the number of categories and simplifying the process should be a recommendation of this inquiry. The current systems is confusing for many people who require access to specialist migration service providers to fully understand which category a person may qualify to be accepted as a migrant or being granted a work visa.

A proactive migration system will benefit the country at a time where there is a clear lack of workers and employment opportunities go begging which is detrimental to our businesses and economy.

An simple and efficient migration program will address the issues surrounding population decline in towns and regions outside of the larger cities with all levels of Government actively involved in the promotion of lifestyle choices, embracing

communities and the opportunity for migrants to be employed instantly at the start of a new life for them in our Country.

5. Strengthening labour market participation and the economic and social contribution of migrants, including family and humanitarian migrants and the partners of working migrants.

Migrants and seasonal workers have skills that are needed and, with the right level of support, have demonstrated that they can take up the work and make a valuable contribution in all aspects of community life.

With more migrant and seasonal workers in the community, businesses will benefit from increased productivity and local expenditure.

Encouraging migrants and seasonal workers through supportive processes to take up vacant positions should be a major priority.

A nationwide database of employment opportunities including information about the communities and the regions that migrants and seasonal workers could locate to should be established.

Communities, employers and Local Government could then access the database on a regular basis to update the information including new employment opportunities.

Avoiding long processing delays and reuniting families leads to a better quality of life and makes for happier workers who have migrated to our Country.

Recognising skills and experiences that migrants have rather than having to go through excessive periods of retraining should be considered.


6. The role of settlement services and vocational training in utilising migrant experiences, knowledge and opportunities.

Settlement Service providers, local community groups, churches and vocational training providers are already very active in their support of migrants and seasonal workers offering a wide range of support and programs.

These organisations are well placed to continue to support migrants because they are working with migrants on a daily basis and clearly understand their needs and what issues they are being confronted with when arriving into new communities.

This experience has been built over a sustained period of time and the Federal Government should consider bolstering its support for service providers who are working directly with migrants and seasonal workers.

As a result of developing ongoing relationships, service providers, community groups and churches are a valuable source of knowledge to assist Federal Government Departments in directing financial and human resources to where they are going to make significant difference to the lives of migrants.



Local Government has developed partnership arrangements with many community groups and service providers to also support what is required on the ground and continually look to strengthen its role in supporting migrants that are moving into the region.

7. Other related matters that may assist the Inquiry.

Access to housing or accommodation that is affordable and of an acceptable standard continues to be a significant challenge, especially in rural and regional areas of the country.

The setting of standards and the ability for migrants to be able to speak to an organisation about poor quality accommodation without fear of losing the accommodation should be considered by the Federal Government.

Rental charges for accommodation needs to be investigated and the introduction of minimum acceptable guidelines and standards considered.

Access to health services and the provision of transport, particularly for non-working family members, needs to be considered to address isolation issues.

Increased communication about the numbers and location of migrants or seasonal workers moving into the Municipality needs greater focus and needs to involve all levels of Government and agencies involved in providing support.

Consideration of funding for cultural programs that allow for a celebration of cultural diversity leading to greater understanding and inclusion should be given with Local Government perhaps best placed to develop and implement cultural programs.


CONCLUSION:

The success of migration and seasonal worker programs for the benefit of the Country should be a priority for all levels of Government.

Working in partnership with service providers to develop relevant programs and processes will lead to a greater uptake of migration visas and the strengthening of the use of seasonal workers.

There are obvious challenges in getting the right systems in place and there are issues confronting migrants and seasonal workers that need to be addressed prior to their arrival. Government support needs to continue after people have been introduced to their new communities.

Swan Hill Rural City Council wishes the Joint Standing Committee every success in its deliberations and looks forward with interest in any recommendations that might arise out of the inquiry as it such an important issue for the future of our Nations ongoing growth and prosperity.



Council representatives would be more than pleased to speak directly with the members of the Joint Standing Committee if the opportunity arises.

For any further information please contact Mr Dennis Hovenden Manager Economic and Community Development on (03) 5036 2333 or mobile telephone [REDACTED].

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

Scott Barber
Chief Executive Officer

