

Safety and wellbeing in Australia's Pacific labour mobility scheme

Research report

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National
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Pacific Affairs

Cover: Workers' accommodation, Far North Queensland
Photograph by Lindy Kanan

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Abbreviations

AE	Approved employer	PICSA	Pacific Island Council of South Australia
AMIEU	Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union	PLF	Pacific Labour Facility
ANU	Australian National University	PLS	Pacific Labour Scheme
CLO	Country Liaison Officer	PLMO	Pacific Labour Mobility Officer
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019	PNG	Papua New Guinea
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (Australia)	RAF	Regional Accelerator Forum
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)	RSE	Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme
HR	Human resources	SA	South Australia
GP	General practitioner (doctor)	SMS	Short message service
LSU	Labour sending unit	STI	Sexually transmitted infection
NSW	New South Wales	SWP	Seasonal Worker Programme
PALM	Pacific Australia Labour Mobility		

Glossary of terms

Approved employer	Approved employer or AE refers to employers who have been approved to recruit staff under the Pacific Labour Scheme and/or the Seasonal Worker Programme (now the PALM scheme).
Blackbirding	Blackbirding refers to the practice of kidnapping Pacific Islanders and using them as forced labour, in particular on sugar and cotton plantations in Australia (Oxford Languages 2023).
Disengaged/disengagement	In the context of the PALM scheme, the term ‘disengaged’ is used to refer to workers who have left their approved employer. The term ‘disengage’ is preferred over ‘abscond’ as it recognises that workers may leave an employer for a variety of reasons, including poor treatment, and that the worker may not be ‘at fault’.
Scheme	In this report we sometimes use the word ‘scheme’ when referring generally to the Seasonal Worker Programme, Pacific Labour Scheme or the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme.
Talanoa	Open, informal conversation between people in which they share their stories, thoughts and feelings (Vaiolleti 2006).
Violence against women	Violence against women is defined as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Violence against women encompasses, but is not limited to, physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family or within the general community, and perpetrated or condoned by the State (UN Women 2020).
Worker	The word ‘worker’ in this report refers to employees who have been recruited to work in Australia under the Pacific Labour Scheme and/or the Seasonal Worker Programme (now the PALM scheme).

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Talanoa session, Regional Accelerator Forum, Cairns
Photograph by Lindy Kanan

Executive summary

Context

Australian industries have used labour from the Pacific Islands in different forms since the late 1800s. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a dark period in the history of Pacific labour; over 55,000 Pacific Islanders worked in Queensland and New South Wales and many were indentured, exploited and treated like slaves.

The current era of Pacific labour mobility commenced with the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme in 2008, which in 2012 became the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP). This was followed by the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) in 2018, and in 2021, the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme was announced to align the two schemes which were being overseen by two different federal government departments.

The PALM scheme allows eligible Australian businesses to hire workers from nine Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste when there are not enough local workers available. The nine Pacific Island countries are Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

The number of PALM scheme workers has rapidly increased following the 2020 COVID-19 border closures, and as at January 2023 there were over 35,000 workers in Australia. These workers on temporary visas augment the existing Pacific diaspora, which according to 2021 census data includes around 335,000 people.

While the PALM scheme looks very different to the 'blackbirding' that took place in the past, there are general concerns about how guest workers are treated in host countries, and specifically about how PALM scheme workers' safety and wellbeing is ensured and supported while they are in Australia.

Aim and methods of the study

The objective of the study was to investigate the safety and wellbeing experiences of men and women participating in the PALM scheme in Australia. Five locations were selected for the study, to align with a series of community forums being facilitated by the Pacific Labour Facility (the body that was responsible for implementing the Pacific Labour Scheme). The locations were Cairns and Caboolture in Queensland, Wagga Wagga and Tamworth in New South Wales and Naracoorte in South Australia.

The research questions focused on factors that impact safety and wellbeing, help-seeking behaviours, barriers to seeking support and the arrangements that

are in place to support the welfare of PALM scheme workers. The data were collected between April and November 2022, and draft findings were workshopped with stakeholders, online and in person, in December 2022. The methods included conducting two online surveys (completed by 303 PALM scheme workers and 54 stakeholders respectively), interviews with 107 people (including 44 workers) and observations at eight regional events. The research also drew on data that were provided by the Pacific Labour Facility regarding reported critical incidents.

The findings of this research project are not necessarily representative of the whole PALM scheme, and do not capture the broad range of experiences of the thousands of men and women in Australia. The study instead seeks to offer some insights and areas for potential further research and policy attention.

Research findings: Individual and social issues

Data provided by the Pacific Labour Facility for the time period of 2 December 2020 to 5 December 2022 showed that most issues experienced by workers concerned employment (71.2% of cases). Through our interviews with workers, we found that workers are concerned about the risk of injury at work, mistreatment, lack of transparency, lack of resolution when grievances are raised, underpayment and not being given enough hours. Lack of communication, transparency and understanding of deductions (e.g. for accommodation, transport, health insurance and airfares) commonly cause frustration and impact wellbeing of workers.

During the study we came to understand that large numbers of workers were leaving their employers (referred to as disengaging, see Glossary of terms) because of the way they were treated, because of misinformation and/or the perception that a better life could be achieved elsewhere.

Despite the PALM scheme offering a skills training program, there was little awareness of it among workers. From the cross-section of people that we spoke to, there had been limited uptake, potentially because the onus is on the employer to make the arrangements and it is not a priority for many employers.

Extramarital affairs and relationship breakdowns were ranked as the biggest personal problems in our online surveys for both workers and stakeholders. Workers saw issues relating to children back home as the next biggest issue, whereas stakeholders ranked mental health as second.

The study found that accessing adequate health care can be difficult for PALM scheme workers for many reasons, including the lack of services available in regional areas, as well as cultural, language, knowledge, transport, cost and other barriers. These were exacerbated by pre-existing conditions that had not been treated back home, and a lack of clarity about how to utilise the mandatory private health insurance that PALM scheme workers hold.

A number of specific issues relating to health care and related services were raised in the interviews, including identifying the need for mental health support as well as knowledge and access to sexual and reproductive health services. Sexually transmitted infections and knowledge of contraception methods were identified as issues, as well as administrative complexities relating to seeking support for pregnancy, childbirth and pregnancy termination services.

In terms of social harms, abuse of alcohol is affecting the safety and wellbeing of PALM scheme workers, and leading to other dangerous behaviours such as drink driving and fighting.

Our research found that men and women experience the PALM scheme differently. For example, women more commonly raised that they felt unsafe at their accommodation: 20.8% of female worker survey respondents said that ‘men hurting women’ is a ‘very big problem’, as opposed to 11.0% of male workers.

The study found that PALM scheme women can experience various forms of violence including intimate partner violence, controlling behaviours, sexual assault and sexual harassment. Service providers felt that women were reluctant to seek out support services because of the fear of what it could mean for their employment or visa.

Findings: Access to support

Stakeholders felt that PALM scheme workers were not adequately prepared prior to arriving in Australia, and that more effort needs to be made to ensure workers understand their conditions of employment and what life will be like in their particular industry and region of Australia.

At the time of our research, the governance and support mechanisms relating to worker welfare differed for the short- and long-term streams. The short-term stream (formerly the Seasonal Worker Programme) included designated employer ‘Welfare and Wellbeing Support Persons’, Pacific Labour Mobility Officers employed by the federal government, a telephone support line and a ‘Community Connections’ program implemented by a consortium led by the Salvation Army.

The long-term stream, the former Pacific Labour Scheme, was supported by the Pacific Labour Facility (implemented by a private company), and included welfare case managers as well as a 24-hour phone line and the progressive roll out of Regional Relationship Managers stationed in regional areas where high concentrations of PALM scheme workers are located.

In both cases, approved employers are supposed to be the first point of contact for PALM scheme workers experiencing any welfare or wellbeing issues. It was continually pointed out that this is problematic due to the power imbalance since workers are reliant on the employer for their visa and ongoing work in Australia and in many cases are reluctant to seek support from an employer, particularly when the issue is of a personal nature. Some labour hire companies in particular were singled out as not adequately supporting the welfare of their workers.

In addition to official mechanisms provided by the government and contracted parties, other formal and informal organisations and individuals are providing support to PALM scheme workers. These include unions, religious affiliated groups, Pacific and Timor-Leste diaspora and other community advocates. A common theme was that many entities are supporting PALM scheme workers, and that some were offering high levels of support without any financial assistance.

Our survey asked where workers would turn if they had a problem. The highest ranked entity was employer with 32%, likely because this is where they are told to go if they have a problem. Following employer was team leader (fellow worker) (27.3%) then PALM scheme phone line (18%).

In terms of barriers to accessing support, respondents to the stakeholder survey saw ‘workers are shy or embarrassed’ as the number one barrier. In the worker survey on the other hand, which had slightly different questions, workers ranked ‘worried about losing job or visa’ as the biggest barrier to seeking support for issues relating to safety and wellbeing.

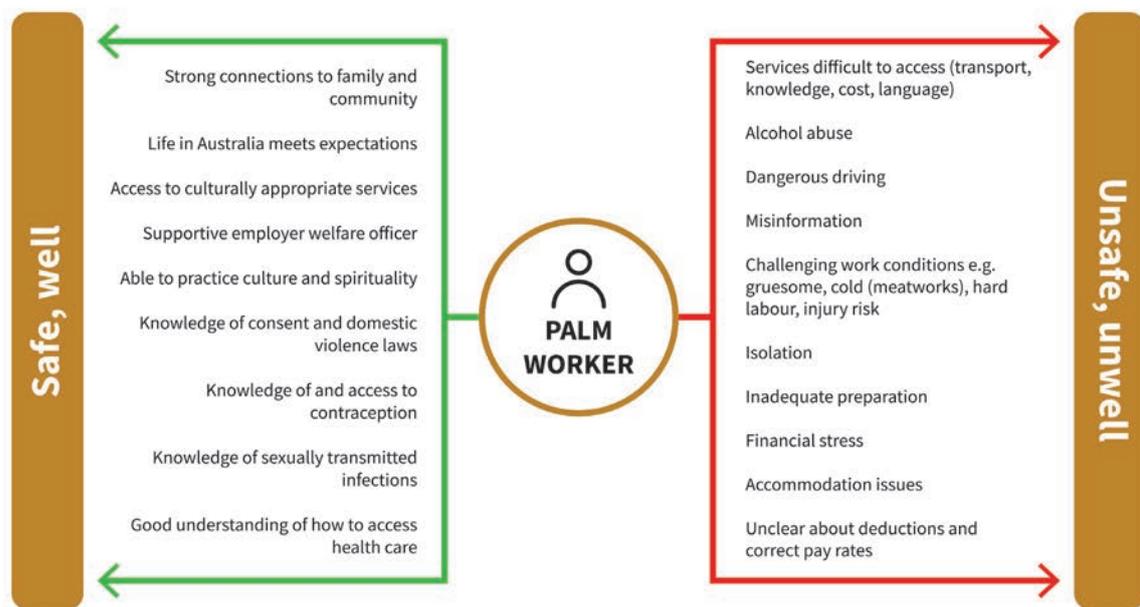
The research project highlighted the challenges that PALM scheme workers can face, particularly due to being located in regional and remote locations where services are scarce and workers can be isolated. We present a case study on PALM scheme workers in the meat processing industry in regional New South Wales, including data on critical incidents that were reported to the Pacific Labour Facility. The data, and our interviews, reveal that meat processing is a very male-dominated industry with certain ‘hot spots’ where higher numbers of ‘welfare’ and ‘employment’ issues have been recorded. Workers felt they were unprepared for the cold and physically demanding nature of the work, and reported that they were being paid less than co-workers who were not employed through the PALM scheme.

Conclusions

The factors that affect safety and wellbeing of PALM scheme workers that came through in our research project are laid out in Figure 1.

The key findings and conclusions of our study are summarised in 32 points, listed below.

Figure 1: Factors affecting safety and wellbeing of PALM scheme workers



Source: Lindy Kanan and Judy Putt. Graphic design by Georgina Ryan.

Support mechanisms provided by the PALM scheme

1. Initiatives by the PLF such as the Regional Accelerator Forums, creating regional networks and placing Regional Relationship Managers in regional locations have improved stakeholder collaboration, which in turn has a positive impact on worker welfare.
2. Recruitment of staff with Pacific Island and Indigenous heritage by the PLF has led to quality activities that are culturally informed. (For example, *talanoa* sessions at RAFs, networking events that celebrate Pacific culture and the work being done by the PLF Cultural Competency Manager).
3. In some locations that we visited, the Community Connections program is playing an important role in connecting approved employers with services, and also connecting PALM scheme workers with relevant health and wellbeing services. In other locations, there was no visibility of the Community Connections program.
4. Placing all of the responsibility for worker welfare on to approved employers is problematic. Not only are the AEs overburdened, it also means that workers do not have access to confidential support when sensitive issues arise. There are also power imbalances due to the workers'

dependence on their employer for their job and visa. An independent, locally available (face to face) and culturally safe mechanism is needed to support workers with issues that they are not comfortable raising with their employer.

5. Instead of continually expanding the role of employers, other support organisations could be engaged to support or educate workers on specialised topics.
6. In some locations that we visited, PALM scheme workers were isolated from the Australian societies in which they were living. Cross-cultural understanding and engagement with local communities need to be at the heart of the delivery of the PALM scheme.

Other services

7. Existing migrant settlement services may have the right skills and knowledge to support PALM scheme workers as the workers face many of the same barriers as humanitarian and other migrants. This is an existing network that could be leveraged.
8. Queensland, with its large Pacific diaspora, has many culturally safe services in place in urban locations. PALM scheme workers in regional locations would greatly benefit from some of these programs (e.g. nutrition education, sexual and reproductive health).

9. There is an opportunity to learn from work being done in New Zealand and south-east Queensland to provide culturally appropriate services for Pacific Islanders. For example, New Zealand has a dedicated Ministry for Pacific Peoples¹ and also provides a guide for Pacific migrants (New Zealand Immigration 2023). South-east Queensland has a number of examples including Pacific liaison officers within the Queensland Police Service, and the Good Start program in the health sector (Children’s Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service 2023).
10. Pacific diaspora organisations, and multicultural and other local organisations, require funding for the support that they are voluntarily providing to PALM scheme workers.
11. Access to services in regional Australia is inadequate. This affects PALM scheme workers who are already disadvantaged in accessing services due to language and cultural barriers and a lack of understanding of systems and services.
12. PALM scheme workers need access to internet and mobile coverage. A lack of mobile reception in remote areas where workers are living has implications for worker safety and wellbeing.
13. There is an urgent need to skill up and recruit translators to the national Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) consistent with the languages spoken by PALM scheme workers.

Policy and governance

14. The PALM scheme, a federal government program, appears to operate in isolation from state and local governance mechanisms, which has implications for worker safety and wellbeing. The PALM scheme could consider models such as the National Settlement Framework which provides a framework for how federal, state and local governments support migrants in Australia.
15. PALM scheme workers are not eligible for many services that would benefit their welfare because of their temporary visa status. For example, access to Medicare related services such as mental health care plans and maternity services. Additionally, some migrant and multicultural services don’t see them as their target population since they are ‘only temporary’.
16. Accommodation providers are a key stakeholder who are sometimes overlooked even though their services can have a substantial impact on safety and wellbeing of PALM scheme workers. The Australian Government could consider how accommodation providers can be included within the regional networks and worker support models.
17. Some approved employers display behaviours and attitudes that could be described as gender discriminatory, exploitative and controlling.

Transparency

18. Greater program transparency and sharing of data could optimise delivery of the PALM scheme. Services and communities can better support PALM scheme workers if they have information on the numbers of workers in their area and what languages they speak. We received this feedback from hospitals, health services, police and local government officials. Many of these services have cultural liaison roles, or potential for these roles if there is an identified need.

Health

19. Access to primary health care is inadequate in many rural areas. Some PALM scheme workers do not have access to the health care services that they require.
20. PALM scheme workers need access to free or low cost, culturally appropriate counselling and mental health services.
21. PALM scheme workers need access to culturally appropriate education and support regarding sexual and reproductive health issues, including prevention and screening services.
22. It would be useful for PALM scheme women to receive culturally tailored information on menstrual hygiene and menstrual products available in Australia (e.g. reusable products which are more sustainable and can save money for workers over time).
23. There is an opportunity to take a preventative rather than reactive approach to health care.
24. There is an opportunity for the Australian Government to work with the PALM scheme preferred health insurance provider to ensure that PALM scheme workers can access culturally safe telehealth appointments.
25. Queensland Health has a Pacific cultural liaison officer at Logan hospital (Queensland Health 25/8/2023). There would be great value in having these types of positions located where there are high concentrations of PALM scheme workers.

Worker safety

26. PALM scheme workers need access to driver education before driving on Australian roads.
27. There is more that the Australian Government can do to protect women participating in the PALM scheme, including ensuring that all workers receive education about sexual consent, sexual assault, and domestic violence laws in the Australian state where they reside. The information needs to be delivered in a culturally appropriate manner.

Worker wellbeing

28. Throughout our study we encountered the most problematic accounts of worker mistreatment and underpayment in the meat processing industry, which is dominated by labour hire companies. While some labour hire companies are providing an excellent service and contributing to the PALM scheme good news stories, others are clearly focused on profit at the expense of workers. Closer monitoring is needed in this sector, as well as opportunities for workers to raise issues without fear of reprisal.
29. We noted the highly gendered nature of workplaces, especially the meat processing industry, and the implications that this has for women's safety and access to support and services. We observed that team leaders are predominantly male, and this can mean that women's needs and views are not being adequately represented.
30. In our interviews, worker deductions were a common source of angst. While recognising the administrative burden that deductions have on employers, it is important to find ways for transparency to be improved and for over-inflated deductions to be eliminated.

Worker training and development

31. Many PALM scheme workers are interested in participating in training and skills development activities in Australia. Skills training funds are available through the PLF, but workers can only access this training if it is initiated by their AE. Many workers would value guidance on how to access training without being dependent on their employer.

Further research

32. This small study had many limitations and touched on a number of areas that we believe require further research and investigation. These include, in particular, experiences of PALM scheme workers in the meat processing industry, and social issues including domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment and sexual and reproductive health.



Banana packing shed, Far North Queensland
Photograph by Lindy Kanan

Chapter 1 – Background and context

Chapter 1 Introduction

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme was announced in September 2021 (Robert et al. 14/9/2021), with the aim of aligning the two previous Pacific labour schemes in Australia – the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP) and the Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS). Since the first scheme (the SWP) was introduced in 2012, tens of thousands of people have come to Australia to work in the agricultural sector for relatively short periods of time. In 2018, the PLS was introduced and expanded the sectors so that approved employers could engage workers in any industry in regional or rural Australia. By 2022, when our study was undertaken, a large number of workers already in the country had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the labour schemes were rapidly adjusted to deal with restrictions, including border closures, and labour shortages in Australia. In such an environment, it was timely to examine the safety and wellbeing of the workers who were in Australia, and whether the arrangements currently in place adequately supported and protected workers. This chapter provides an overview of the context that informed the focus and approach of the study, including a brief history of the Pacific diaspora in Australia and more recent impact of the labour schemes on the countries of origin, as well as Australia. The second half of the chapter outlines how the study was undertaken and ends with an acknowledgement of its limitations.

Context

Pacific Islanders in Australia

More than 55,000 people from Pacific Islands, mostly men and boys, were brought to Australia to labour in sugarcane and cotton farms in Queensland and northern New South Wales between 1863 and 1904 (AHRC 2003). This practice is known as ‘blackbirding’ and was a notorious period of exploitation and ‘slave-like’ conditions (Higginbotham 2017). Many people were abducted or induced to board boats in their home countries with no or little understanding of what would happen next; however, over time most people moved relatively freely and had some idea of what would be involved (Petrou and Connell 2023). In the 1860s, an indentured labour system was introduced

into Queensland whereby Pacific Islanders signed three-year contracts and were paid low wages. While many returned home or were deported back home at the beginning of the twentieth century with the advent of the ‘White Australia policy’, a few of these workers continued to live in Australia and are now referred to as South Sea Islanders (Queensland Government 2023).

A report by what was then the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission details the long history of discrimination against people of such heritage and the battle for recognition as a distinct ethnic group throughout much of the twentieth century (AHRC 2003). South Sea Islanders were recognised as a distinct community group by the federal government in 1994 and the Queensland government in 2000. At the time there were more than 10,000 South Sea Islanders estimated to live in Australia, the majority in Queensland. In 2001, the Queensland government adopted an action plan to ensure Australian South Sea Islanders had the opportunity to ‘participate in and contribute to the economic, social, political and cultural life of Queensland’ (AHRC 2003).

More recent visitors and migrants from the region have contributed to an increase in the number of people from Pacific Island countries living in Australia. As is discussed later in the report, the extent and nature of the Pacific diaspora in Australia has an impact on PALM scheme workers and their likelihood of finding culturally relevant organisations and kin networks, and on how sensitive local residents and service providers might be to the specific backgrounds of workers. Based on census data and adjusted to reduce double counting and better identify Indo-Fijians, Liu and Howes (31/3/2023) estimate there were 337,000 people with Pacific Island heritage in Australia in 2021. This was a significant increase of 48.9% from 2006, when 171,994 people of Pacific Island heritage were estimated to be in Australia. Their figures show that the size of the diaspora varies considerably for different Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste (which is included here due to its inclusion in the PALM scheme). The most populous are Fijians and Samoans; in contrast there are far fewer residents from Melanesian and Micronesian countries. Table 1 includes data for all 10 PALM scheme countries, as well as the Cook Islands, Niue, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Palau.

Table 1: People of Pacific and Timor-Leste heritage living in Australia, 2021, estimated number and percentage of total

Country	Number	Percentage
Fiji	118,710	35.37
Samoa	98,022	29.20
Tonga	43,469	12.95
Cook Islands	27,494	8.19
Papua New Guinea	22,668	6.75
Timor-Leste	11,105	3.31
Niue	6225	1.85
Solomon Islands	2704	0.81
Vanuatu	2380	0.71
Kiribati	1263	0.38
Tuvalu	995	0.30
Nauru	571	0.17
Federated States of Micronesia	18	<0.1
Palau	10	<0.1
Marshall Islands	8	<0.1
TOTAL	335,642	100.00

Source: Liu and Howes (31/3/2023)

Pacific labour mobility schemes in Australia

The current era of Pacific labour mobility commenced with the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot Scheme in 2008,

which in 2012 became the Seasonal Worker Programme (SWP). The Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) started in July 2018 with 59 workers on the Northern Australia Worker Pilot Program and was capped until 2019. The SWP was known as a short-term program (up to nine months), primarily for the agriculture industry and the PLS was the longer-term scheme (up to three years) and included any sector in regional or rural Australia (DFAT 2021:1).

On 4 April 2022, the Australian Government brought the SWP and PLS together under the consolidated Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme (Jeffress et al. 2022). The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme allows eligible Australian businesses to hire workers from nine Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste when there are not enough local workers available. The nine Pacific Island countries are Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Reforms have been taking place since late 2021 to merge the two programs; however, the ‘alignment’ was not yet complete at the time of our research. While the SWP and PLS visa streams had been rolled into one (Department of Home Affairs 2022), two separate deeds of agreement continued to operate. The deeds of agreement are the contracts that employers sign when they become approved employers, or AEs.

At the end of January 2023, there were 35,494 PALM scheme workers in Australia (DEWR 22/2/2023). Figure 2 shows the locations of the 10 participating countries, as well as the number of workers in Australia from each of those countries. At the same point in time, 407 employers were approved to recruit workers under the scheme, 312 (77%) were direct employers and 95 (23%) were labour hire companies (DEWR 22/2/2023).

Figure 2: Number of workers in Australia from PALM scheme participating countries, January 2023



Source: CartoGIS, Australian National University

Table 2: Location of PALM scheme workers in Australia by state or territory, number and percentage, January 2023

State or territory	Number of PALM scheme workers	Percentage of PALM scheme workers
Queensland	12,313	34.7
Victoria	6221	17.5
New South Wales	5606	15.8
Tasmania	4200	11.8
Western Australia	3527	9.9
South Australia	2455	6.9
Northern Territory	1146	3.2
Australian Capital Territory	26	0.1
TOTAL	35,494	99.9

Source: DEWR (22/2/2023)

Tables 2 and 3 show the states of Australia where PALM scheme workers were located and their country of origin, as at January 2023. More than one-third were located in Queensland (34.7%), and the most common country of origin was Vanuatu (29.6%). Table 4 shows that, in January 2023, the majority of PALM scheme workers (71%) were engaged in the agriculture sector, with 90.6% of these being short-term workers. In contrast, the majority of long-term workers (70.4%) were employed in the meat processing industry.

Table 3: PALM scheme workers in Australia by country of origin, number and percentage, January 2023

Country of origin	Number of PALM scheme workers	Percentage of PALM scheme workers
Vanuatu	10,493	29.6
Tonga	5832	16.4
Fiji	4497	12.7
Samoa	4414	12.4
Timor-Leste	4134	11.6
Solomon Islands	3921	11.0
Papua New Guinea	1262	3.5
Kiribati	898	2.5
Tuvalu	41	0.1
Nauru	2	<0.1
TOTAL	35,494	99.9

Source: DEWR (22/2/2023)

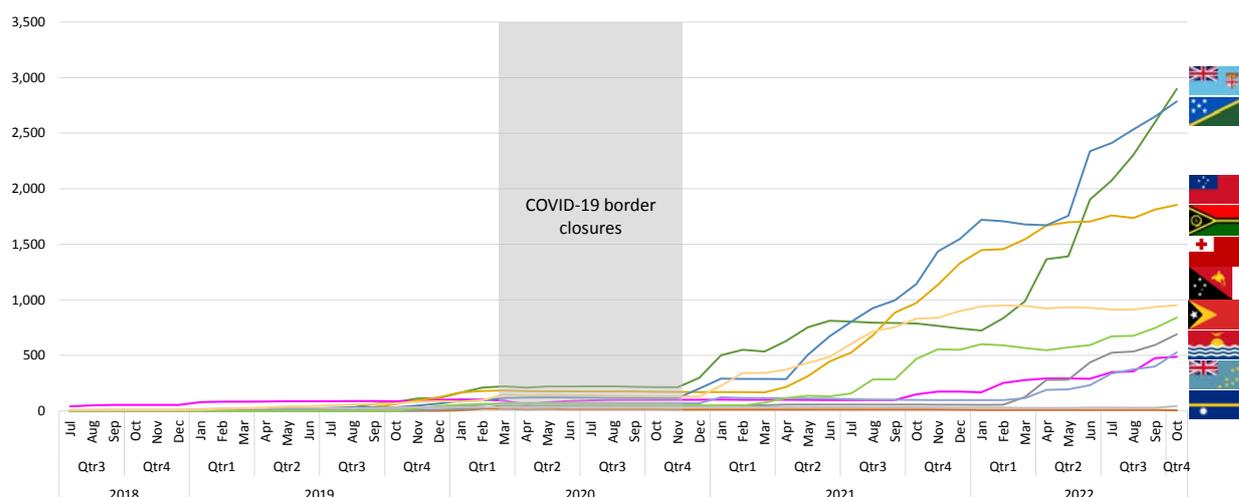
There has been a substantial increase in the number of PALM scheme workers in Australia following the COVID-19 pandemic. There were around 8000 workers in Australia in February 2020 and this number plateaued during the border closures of March–November 2020. Once PALM scheme workers were able to begin entering Australia again, the numbers quickly grew, reaching 31,500 in October 2022 (Jeffress et al. 2022:3).² This change is depicted in Figure 3.

Table 4: PALM scheme workers by industry, long and short-term workers, January 2023

Industry	Short-term workers	Long-term workers	Total number	Percentage
Agriculture	22,859	2359	25,218	71.0
Meat processing	0	8627	8627	24.3
Accommodation	375	374	749	2.1
Residential care	0	536	536	1.5
Other	0	364	364	1.0
TOTAL	23,234	12,260	35,494	99.9

Source: DEWR (22/2/2023)

Figure 3: Number of long-term workers by country of origin between July 2018 and October 2022



Source: Jeffress et al. (2022:6). Reproduced with permission.

The figure shows that most long-term workers come from Fiji and Solomon Islands, followed by Samoa, Vanuatu, Tonga, PNG, Timor-Leste, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Nauru. In October 2022, 80% of long-term workers were men and 20% were women. The increase in the proportion of men is attributed to the rapid growth of workers in the meat processing industry, with 89% of the workers in that industry being male.

Impacts of Pacific labour mobility

There has been considerable debate on the impact of these labour schemes. On one hand they have been described as a ‘win-win’ for Australia and the Pacific (Bishop 2/7/2018) or a ‘triple win’ for the individuals participating, the Pacific Island economies, and the Australian economy (Jeffress et al. 2022; Stead and Petrou 2023). Noted positive impacts include:

- That long-term workers earned an estimated \$40,836 on average (in 2020) and managed to save or remit 39% of their income after expenses.
- It is estimated that \$101 million has been remitted to the Pacific by long-term workers since the inception of the PLS. Remittances are commonly used for home renovations, starting a business and children’s education.
- Women who participate can experience increased financial independence, self-esteem, agency and independence. (Jeffress et al. 2022)

On the other hand, concerns have been raised regarding the impacts of family separation and care practices (Withers 2022; Withers and Hill 2023), the ‘brain drain’ from home countries (Curtain 13/10/2022, 14/10/2022, 20/10/2022), and the vulnerability, precariousness and high risk of exploitation of workers

while they are in Australia (Ball et al. 2011; Howe et al. 2019; Howe et al. 2022; Aust. Senate 2022:8).

Petrou and Connell (2023:243), for example, note that since workers are temporary, unsure of their rights and the costs of various things in Australia (from health insurance to accommodation and transport fares), they could be, and sometimes are, easily exploited by unscrupulous recruiters and employers. Additionally, the 2017 inquiry into establishing a Modern Slavery Act in Australia recommended that the Australian Government introduce specific measures to improve protections for workers on the Seasonal Worker Programme, including by introducing Pacific liaison officers (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2017:ii). This vulnerability to exploitation and lack of protection is intrinsically linked to the experience of PALM scheme workers in Australia, their safety and their wellbeing.

Concerns about workers’ safety and wellbeing

A review of international literature reveals that guest workers often confront barriers to accessing support and can struggle with a wide array of adverse events and conditions related to their work and position in the host society (see for example Anderson 2010; Barnes 2013; Beckford 2016; Berg and Farbenblum 2017; Bryceson 2019; Petrou and Connell 2023). The literature also examines related issues including the threat of deportation as a disciplinary technique by employers and other actors (Basok et al. 2014) and the binding of workers to employers (Franck and Anderson 2019).

Turning to Australia, the Seasonal Worker Programme was in the past criticised for neglecting pastoral care (Bailey 2015) and others argue that despite the SWP’s intent to support and protect workers, it

sometimes diminishes security as it restricts rights of mobility and delimits accessibility to health care (Tazreiter et al. 2016:127). Tazreiter et al. (2016:127) also noted that the social costs of the scheme were yet to be well documented.

At the time that this study was designed, in 2020 and 2021, there was limited published information available regarding how the SWP pastoral care arrangements (which safeguard worker wellbeing) were playing out for workers. Similarly, we could only locate sparse public information regarding welfare support mechanisms for the relatively new Pacific Labour Scheme. At the same time, labour migration flows from the Pacific to Australia were changing given the post-COVID-19 program 'restart' and the addition of large numbers of meat processing industry roles. This was taking place against a backdrop of changing governance arrangements between federal government departments and, hence, we felt it timely to initiate a study on pastoral care, worker welfare, safety and wellbeing.

Our review of literature on wellbeing and services for Pacific people identified three themes, which underpinned the focus and approach of this study. They are: 1) culture and wellbeing; 2) help seeking behaviours; and 3) access to support and information. Some of the literature on these themes is summarised below.

Culture and wellbeing

An understanding of Pacific cultures is essential for understanding the wellbeing needs of Pacific Islanders. In Aotearoa New Zealand, a study found that migrants from the Pacific experience gaps in service provision that result in gender and health inequality, financial hardship and stress, poor housing, unemployment and poverty (Namoori-Sinclair 2020). The research stresses the need for cultural competency and integration of policy, service provision and community engagement.

In Australia, Bailey and Bedford (2022:13) observed that employers' and workers' experiences during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharper focus the need for a more holistic approach to supporting worker wellbeing; one that recognises the deep connections and responsibilities Pacific seasonal workers have to their socially significant groups and networks in their home countries. New Zealand has adopted a new approach to worker welfare that draws on Pacific perspectives, incorporating familial, spiritual, cultural, physical and psychological aspects of wellbeing (Bailey and Bedford 2022:13).

From a Pacific perspective, spirituality is central, and wellness does not exist without balance of the spirit, body, mind and environment (Ihara and Vakalahi 2011:405). Some examples of Pacific cultural concepts that are central to wellbeing including *wantok* and *vā*. *Wantok* is a term used in Melanesia to express patterns of relationships and networks that link people in families and regional localities. It is an identity concept at the macro level and a social capital concept at the micro and family levels (Nanau 2011:32). The *wantok*

system has been likened to similar terms in the Pacific region such as *kerekere* in Fiji and *fa'asamoa* in Samoa, which all advocate cooperation between people who speak the same language (Kabutaulaka 1998). The *wantok* system signifies a network of cooperation and reciprocal support. While informal, the *wantok* system encourages social obligations whereby those within a *wantok* network look after each other (Walton and Jackson 2020:7).

Vā is a pan-Pacific notion that describes the spatial and relational context within which secular and spiritual relationships unfold (Anae 2007). Relationships with god (spirituality) and with others (communality) are important aspects of life for Samoan and Tongan people living in diaspora contexts (Makasiale 2013). The movements of Samoan and Tongan people between diaspora communities and their homelands are part and parcel of their *tausi le vā* (Samoan for maintaining social spaces) or *tauhi vā* (Tongan for maintaining social spaces); processes of reciprocal maintenance of relationships. Similarly, the regular visits and gathering of groups while overseas allows for important face-to-face *talanoa* (talking, communicating, storying) that builds and nurtures social spaces (Enari and Faleolo 2020:112).

These concepts both centre around relationships and support the notion that an understanding of culture is necessary to support wellbeing.

Help seeking behaviours

A survey of young adults in urban Papua New Guinea found that if someone experiences an issue such as domestic violence, they would most likely recommend that the person speaks with:

1. A local pastor, minister or priest (69.3%)
2. A family member or family leader (30.2%)
3. A good friend (29.0%)
4. A local community leader (27.9%)
5. A phone counselling hotline (25.7%)
6. Someone at work (4.5%). (Putt et al. 2021:10)

We were interested to know if there are similarities between these findings and the preferences that workers from the Pacific and Timor-Leste may have in terms of seeking support for issues related to safety and wellbeing while they are in Australia.

In Australia, research has found that Pacific people use health services less than others and often delay seeking treatment for serious conditions (Kingi et al. 2021:374). There are a number of cultural and logistical barriers associated with accessing health services. One study found that if Pacific people did seek support for mental health issues, they commonly approached family members and schools, and accessed radio programs and printed resources in their own language. It was less common for Pacific people to seek out formal mainstream services in the first instance. If they did access these services, they tended to be referred by a family member, teacher, minister or friend (Kingi et al. 2021:376).

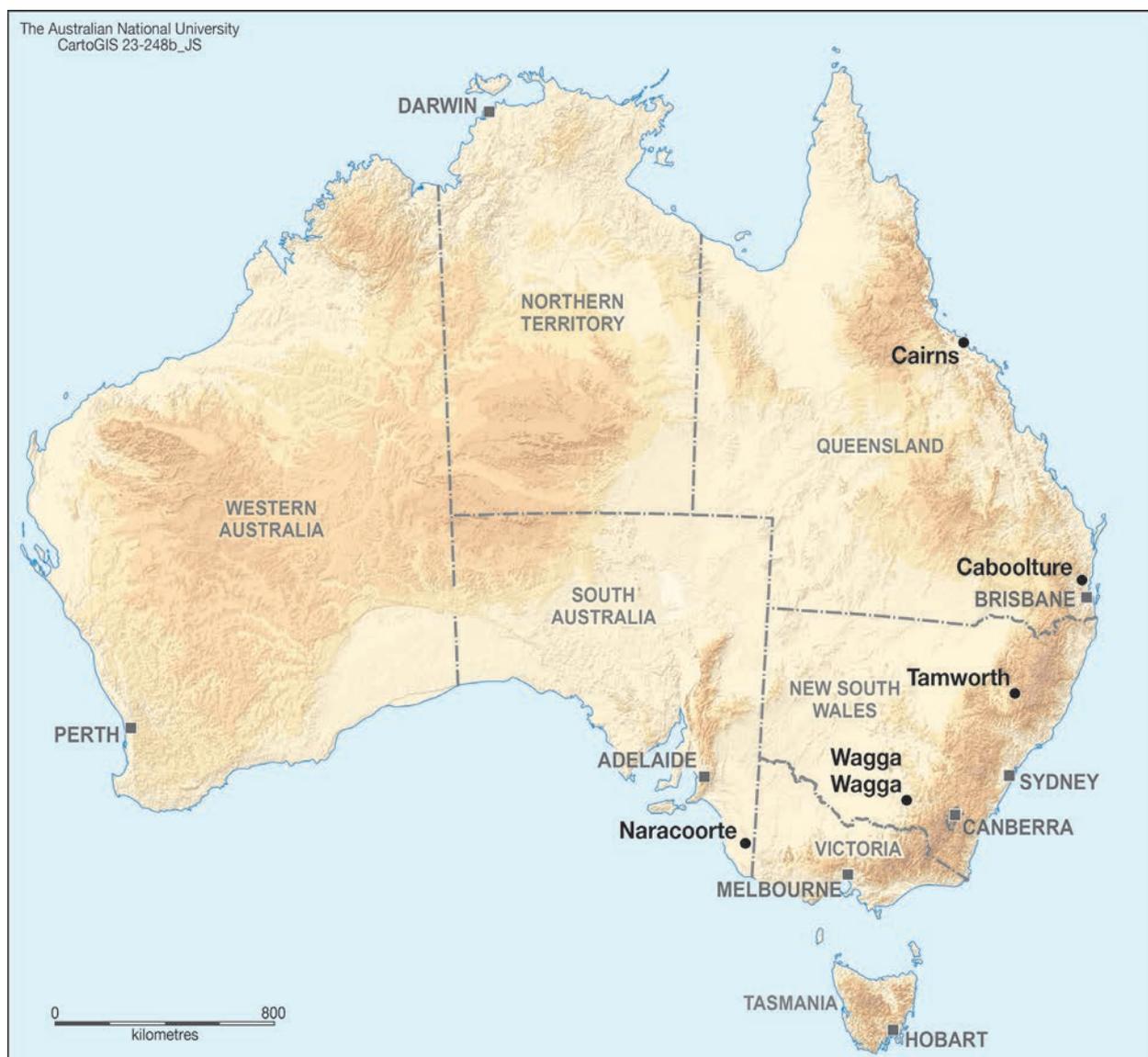
The same study found that Pacific people may not seek support because health care services did not match their cultural models of health and wellbeing. A perceived lack of cultural understanding and respect within services meant people delayed or avoided seeking assistance during times of mental distress. The study concluded that instead of relying on mainstream services to adapt wholly to Pacific needs, it may be effective for community groups and the voluntary sector to work side by side with health services, acting as intermediaries, to maintain Pacific health and wellbeing (Kingi et al. 2021:377).

We were interested to know if this hesitancy to access health and other services is also true for PALM scheme participants, and if a similar model of using community groups or the voluntary sector as intermediaries may also be applicable in the labour mobility context.

Access to support and information

The impact evaluation of the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme in Aotearoa New Zealand notes that some employer supervisors are described as ‘lacking culture-specific competencies required to work with workers from individual Pacific countries’ (Bedford et al. 2020:49) and one source noted that supervisors can have racist attitudes towards RSE workers (Vaioleti et al. 2019). Some informants of the RSE Impact Study also explained that there can be a disconnect between the supportive attitudes of an employer towards their Pacific workers and the supervisor who is responsible for the workers on a day-to-day basis (Bedford et al. 2020:49). One pertinent question raised by workers in the RSE Impact Study was around how workers can bring concerns about pay or working conditions to the attention of their employer when the current system for raising disputes is via the team leader, and team

Figure 4: Study sites in Australia



Source: CartoGIS, Australian National University

leaders generally want to avoid confrontations with the employer (Bedford et al. 2020:49).

Our research project similarly aimed to explore the arrangements that are in place between employers and workers in the Australian context (as well as intermediaries such as supervisors, team leaders and designated employer support people) and how effective they are in allowing workers to raise issues and in supporting worker safety and wellbeing.

Safety and wellbeing study

Aim and design

The objective of the study was to investigate the safety and wellbeing experiences of men and women participating in the PALM scheme in Australia. The study was designed through collaboration between the authors and the PLF, which in practical terms meant that more information was gathered regarding longer-term workers; that is, those who were originally recruited under the PLS. However, many of the issues raised by stakeholders apply to short-term workers, and as outlined below, a number of the workers interviewed and who participated in the workers' survey were under the SWP.

Given the large number of PALM scheme workers in Australia and the finite resources of the research team, five locations across Australia were agreed on to be the focus of this study: Cairns and Caboolture in Queensland, Wagga Wagga and Tamworth in New South Wales and Naracoorte in South Australia (see Figure 4).

These locations were chosen as they were the locations of the first five 'Regional Accelerator Forums' or RAFs, held in 2021 and 2022, which were an initiative by the PLF to establish effective regional operating environments for the scheme. The RAFs were a mechanism to clarify roles and responsibilities, share information and create regional networks. They were used by the authors as an entry point to introduce the research and build relationships with stakeholders in the locations.

Research questions

The study set out to explore the following research questions:

- How do factors such as gender, geographical location, accommodation arrangements, employment sector and border closures influence safety and wellbeing?
- What other factors impact safety and wellbeing?
- Who do PALM scheme participants talk to when they need help with an issue relating to safety and wellbeing?
- What are the barriers to seeking support?
- What are the Pacific cultural values and principles that act as a protective factor for worker safety and wellbeing?
- Have the Regional Accelerator Forums been successful in generating regional networks?
- What type of welfare arrangements best support worker safety and wellbeing?

Methods

The methods used included observations at eight events, two online surveys, qualitative interviews, and a review of data and documentation obtained from the PLF as well as what was available in the public domain. More detail on these methods is provide below.

The PLF provided two tranches of critical incident data, covering in total a two-year period (2 December 2020 to 5 December 2022). These data included a range of incidents (cases) recorded by the PLF, from general enquiries to serious incidents affecting workers, and is described in more detail in Chapter 2. The data only pertained to the three jurisdictions that the study focused on, that is Queensland, New South Wales (NSW) and South Australia (SA). During the two-year period, the categories being used to record the cases reported to the PLF evolved. However, variables that were consistently used included number of cases by location, by month and by type of incident. It should be noted that these PLF recorded cases are likely to grossly underrepresent the actual number of incidents experienced by workers because first, it excludes those under the SWP, and second, it relies only on those matters reported to the PLF.

In total, 1901 cases were recorded by the PLF for the two-year period.

The researchers attended eight events – RAFs at Caboolture, Cairns, Tamworth and Wagga Wagga, two in-person regional network meetings in south-east Queensland, and two online meetings with the north Queensland and South Australian networks.

Two surveys were conducted, one that was aimed at program stakeholders such as approved employers (AEs), community groups and service providers, and one that was for PALM scheme workers.

The stakeholder survey was distributed through the PLF weekly newsletter in July and August 2022, as well as by email to various relevant PALM scheme stakeholders whose contact details we had on file. The stakeholder survey received 54 responses. The most common category of the type of stakeholder who participated in the survey was an employer – either an AE that directly employed workers (31.5%) or an AE that was a labour hire company (11.1%) (see Table 5).

The worker survey was sent by SMS to 5182 worker phone numbers in July 2022. The message was received by 4479 phones. These were mobile numbers that the PLF had on file, so included mostly Pacific Labour Scheme workers and not as many from the Seasonal Worker Programme. Workers who we met face to face while visiting the different regions were also requested to complete the survey. The worker survey had a total of 303 responses. In the survey, the majority said they were employed under the Pacific Labour Scheme (74.6%), and that they were male (74.6%), and more than half said they were either from Queensland (36.0%) or from New South Wales (27.1%) (see Table 6).

Table 5: Participants in the stakeholder survey by type of stakeholder, number and percentage

Stakeholder type	Number	Percentage
Approved employer – direct	17	31.5
Community sector	8	14.8
Approved employer – labour hire	6	11.1
Religious affiliated	4	7.4
Local/regional service provider	4	7.4
Other	3	5.5
Labour hire host site	3	5.5
Pacific Labour Facility staff	3	5.5
Local government	2	3.7
Federal government	2	3.7
Police	1	1.8
Accommodation provider	1	1.8
TOTAL	54	99.7

Source: Stakeholders' survey

Table 6: Participants in the workers' survey by program, gender and state, number and percentage

	Number	Percentage
Program		
Pacific Labour Scheme	226	74.6
Seasonal Worker Programme	22	7.3
PALM scheme	42	13.9
Don't know	3	1.0
Other	3	1.0
Did not answer	7	2.3
Gender		
Male	226	74.6
Female	72	23.7
Transgender	1	0.3
Did not answer	4	1.3
State or Territory		
Queensland	109	36.0
New South Wales	82	27.1
Victoria	40	13.2
Western Australia	31	10.2
South Australia	17	5.6
Northern Territory	13	4.3
Tasmania	6	2.0
Australian Capital Territory	1	0.3
Other	1	0.3
Did not answer	3	0.9
TOTAL	303	100.0

Source: Workers' survey

In addition to the two online surveys, we conducted semi-structured individual interviews with 107 people between April and October 2022. Participants were recruited through the online survey, at RAFs, through personal connections and snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted via phone, video call (Zoom, Teams or WhatsApp) or face to face, depending on the location and preference of individuals involved. Table 7 shows the numbers of interviews conducted and the category of participants. The authors visited five of the six study locations in person. For Naracoorte, South Australia, interviews were conducted by phone and Zoom. As can be seen in Table 7, the category that had the largest proportion of interviewees (including focus group participants) were PALM scheme workers (41.1%).

The ethical aspects of the research were approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol 2021/380). Safety and confidentiality of research participants remained a priority throughout. Advice was sought from Pacific community members when designing the study, and key intermediaries were identified to ensure culturally sensitive introductions to participants. Research participants were not directly asked about potentially traumatic experiences; rather, information on sensitive topics was obtained indirectly from professionals such as community workers and nurses who support PALM scheme workers. All participants were provided with information on available support services.

Table 7: Interview participants by sector, number and percentage

Category	Number	Percentage
PALM scheme workers (includes PLS, SWP and disengaged workers and team leaders from horticulture, meat processing and aged care sectors)	44	41.1
Community sector (includes civil society organisations, Pacific diaspora, sport etc.)	19	17.8
Approved employer representatives (includes direct employers, labour hire companies and labour hire host sites)	15	14.0
Government sector (includes local councils, federal government, state police services, Pacific Labour Facility staff, Pacific country liaison officers)	15	14.0
Health sector (includes health insurance providers, general practitioners, sexual health nurses and hospital employees)	7	6.5
Religious (includes pastors or religious affiliated organisations)	4	3.7
Accommodation providers	2	1.9
Union representatives	1	0.9
TOTAL	107	99.9

Limitations

The chosen methods present a number of limitations.

The approved employers (AEs) who volunteered to take part in the study are more likely to be those who are already dedicated to providing their workers with a great experience in terms of wellbeing and who have an interest in continuous learning and improvement. We believe AEs who have questionable records in terms of safety and wellbeing would be less likely to engage. We are also cognisant that many AEs are extremely busy, under a lot of pressure and do not have time or the desire to engage with researchers.

On the other hand, in terms of workers, and other stakeholders to some extent, we feel that many decided to participate because there were particular things they wanted to raise, often negative, about the scheme or their experience.

For many of the quotes that are provided in this report, we have been deliberately vague about the location and role of that person in order to protect the identities of the people and organisations that agreed to speak with us.

We recognise that in this report we have often only presented one side of the story (i.e., that of the PALM scheme worker) and have not sought to verify their claims. One reason for that is to protect their identity, as many feared retribution from their employer for speaking with us. Another reason is that seeking to verify claims was not the objective of the study; our primary area of interest was the experiences and perceptions of participants. Despite the potential for perceived bias, we thought it important to share what we were told by PALM scheme workers as we have observed that their voices are often missing from PALM scheme advisory committees and consultation processes.

The authors only have basic abilities in Pacific languages, which limited the amount of engagement that we were able to have with workers with lower levels of English.

Notwithstanding these limitations, while the research may not be representative of the whole program, we believe it offers many important and valid insights into the PALM scheme and the experiences of PALM scheme workers.

Chapter 1 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the history of Pacific Islanders in Australia, and the current diaspora, with almost two-thirds of people of Pacific and Timor-Leste heritage living in Australia in 2021 estimated to be from either Fiji or Samoa. The modern labour mobility schemes, the SWP, PLS and PALM scheme, had their genesis in a pilot scheme in 2008, with a rapid and substantial increase in long-term workers during the years of COVID-19 restrictions and when borders were opened up. By January 2023, there were 35,494 PALM scheme workers in Australia, with more than one-third located in Queensland (34.7%). The most

common country of origin was Vanuatu (29.6%), the majority (71%) were engaged in the agriculture sector and of these 90.6% were short-term workers, and the majority of long-term workers (70.4%) were employed in the meat processing industry. Positive and negative impacts of the recent labour schemes on home countries and workers were identified in the literature, including economic benefits. With regard to the safety and wellbeing of workers, three themes emerged from the literature that shaped our study: culture, help-seeking behaviours, and access to support and information. Our study sought to explore these themes in five sites in Australia by multiple methods including a review of PLF

data on 1901 critical incidents recorded over two years from 2 December 2020 to 5 December 2022; surveys of 54 stakeholders and of 303 workers; 107 interviews with key stakeholders of which 41.1% were workers; and attendance at eight events organised by the PLF, including RAFs in four locations. We conclude the chapter by highlighting the limitations of our small study done by two non-Pacific researchers and with methods that each have inherent biases. However, as we argue in the final chapter, the study's findings draw attention to issues and concerns that will require careful monitoring, especially as more recent reforms are implemented.



Abattoir workers' car park, New South Wales.

(MMT stands for *Mate Ma'a Tonga* which means 'die for Tonga'. It's the name of the Tonga's rugby league team and an expression of deep commitment and dedication to land and country.)

Photograph by Judy Putt

Chapter 2 – Research findings – Individual and social issues

Chapter 2 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the individual and social issues that were raised by workers and by stakeholders. To set the scene, the chapter begins with a reminder of the diversity of the workers' backgrounds, and the importance of varying socio-cultural notions of wellbeing. It is also important to stress that many workers and stakeholders had very positive comments to make about the labour schemes and the advantages that can accrue to individuals, families back home, local communities and employers. However, our interest lay in what challenges are confronting workers, especially as they relate to workplace and personal safety. A final section discusses in more depth the gendered dimensions to wellbeing with a focus on women's experiences of safety in workplaces, accommodation and in the community.

Significance of place of origin and culture

For local services and communities in rural and remote regions of Australia where PALM scheme workers are located, there may not have been much past contact with, or knowledge of, the Pacific region or of Timor-Leste. The range of countries that workers come from is necessarily well-known. Cultural sensitivity involves being aware of countries of origin and differences that exist among workers because of age, gender, their employment histories and religious affiliations, to name just a few.

Both stakeholders and workers in interviews commented on the significance of the country of origin, and how often workers were close to their compatriots and did not mix as much with workers from other places. In particular, the group that workers arrived with often remained their most important social group, with the group frequently co-resident in accommodation and employed at the same workplace. Given that workers come from 10 different countries in the region, and that each country has its own unique history, cultural traditions and clusters of languages, there is considerable diversity among and between workers employed through the PALM scheme.

Age and gender are also significant, and considerable heterogeneity can exist within groups from the same country, often exacerbated by whether they come from what were referred to as 'villages' or had lived or worked in urban locations in home countries. Some workers have had no history of paid employment prior to arriving in Australia, while others had skilled or semi-skilled employment in their home country.

Women workers, at least for the initial period after arrival, typically reside in female-only areas

of accommodation, either in designated sections of provided accommodation or in rental houses. They are often employed in female dominated areas of the workplace or employment sector. An example is a cohort of women from Kiribati who lived together in a rented house and were employed in an aged care facility. As is discussed later, the meatworks have predominantly male workforces, and this, along with the nature of the work, fosters a hyper-masculine culture which has ramifications for the workers employed in that sector.

Cultural dimensions to wellbeing

Members of Pacific organisations stressed how integral cultural understanding is to worker welfare. Connection to family back home is an important factor, particularly in the Pacific cultural context where family and community are part of the person's identity and central to emotional wellbeing. One stakeholder of Pacific heritage stressed to us that Pacific wellbeing needs to be addressed holistically, and needs to include cultural, social, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

A PALM scheme worker who completed our survey noted that 'employers dealing with Pacific workers need to be more aware and need more understanding of each Pacific background'. A Pacific service provider told us that many issues regarding welfare are due to cultural misunderstandings. Multiple interviewees spoke of the cultural changes and adjustments needed to move from the Pacific to Australia, for example:

- from a relaxed 'island' way of life to the structure and demands of an Australian workplace
- from a warm climate to cold climates, or to a cold workplace in the case of the meat processing industry.

These changes can be overcome with the right supports in place, but without them, they can build up to a miserable experience. In the words of one stakeholder from the Pacific diaspora:

If you understood that we are collective beings and that's our world view, not the individualistic one, then you would create policy and structures and systems that are culturally responsive to the people that you're bringing over. (INT3, member of Pacific diaspora, Queensland)

Critical incidents reported to PLF

At the time of our research, the PLF was using a 'First Response Escalation Process' to determine which types of incidents should be reported, and to whom.

Figure 5: PALM scheme first response escalation process

FIRST RESPONSE ESCALATION PROCESS

This document outlines the roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders involved in supporting the community of care for workers on the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. It is essential that all stakeholders follow the process below when responding to issues and incidents to ensure they are dealt with effectively and in a timely manner.

IN AN EMERGENCY CALL 000

LOW RISK LEVEL 1 – GENERAL ISSUES		MEDIUM RISK LEVEL 2 – REPORTABLE ISSUES		HIGH RISK LEVEL 3 – CRITICAL INCIDENTS	
Timeframes: Must act as soon as practically possible (resolution within 28 days). Minor medical requires immediate first aid or referral to medical professional. Includes minor issues resolved without the PLF or other party consultation or assistance.		Timeframes: Must act and notify within 5 days. Includes significant issues requiring PLF oversight. Consultation with CLO, LSU, FWO and Home Affairs may be required.		Timeframes: Must act and notify immediately (no longer than 24 hrs). Urgent and serious issues. PLF intervention and additional oversight from PLF CLO, LSU and HOM partners may be required.	
Examples of Level 1 issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • minor employer issues • payslips • minor conflict with a supervisor • money transfer queries • non-urgent visa queries • health insurance queries • general welfare issues • minor medical concerns • minor issues with accommodation • minor conflict at accommodation sites. 		Examples of Level 2 issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unresolved level 1 issues • end of employment • repatriations • absconding • worker hospitalised • workplace dispute or serious allegation • worker exiting the PLS • urgent visa queries (risk to worker imminent) • police and/or emergency services 		Examples of Level 3 issues: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unresolved level 2 issues • death of worker • critical injury or illness of a worker • worker arrested and or involved in a criminal offence (victim or perpetrator) • worker admitted to hospital in life threatening condition • domestic violence incident involving a worker, either as a victim or perpetrator • major deed non-compliance event. 	
APPROVED EMPLOYER	ALL OTHER STAKEHOLDERS	APPROVED EMPLOYER	ALL OTHER STAKEHOLDERS	APPROVED EMPLOYER	ALL OTHER STAKEHOLDERS
1. AE to analyse the issue. 2. AE to find a remedy. 3. AE to ensure resolution has taken place.	1. Contact the AE during business hours. 2. If unresolved, escalate via level 2.	1. AE addresses and resolves matter with workers. 2. AE to inform and seek support from LO/LSU of matter if unresolved. 3. AE to engage with PLF/other stakeholders as per DEED requirements. 4. AE to ensure resolution has taken place.	1. Report to AE (during business hours) and/or call the PALM support service line on 1800 51 51 31.	1. AE to report Incident to PLF. 2. AE to engage with PLF/ other relevant stakeholders to identify actions to take. 3. AE to ensure resolution has taken place.	1. Report to AE and/or call the PALM support service line (1800 51 51 31) as soon as practically possible, within 24 hours.

ACRONYMS: AE: Approved employer, CLO: Country Liaison Officer, FWO: Fair Work Ombudsman, HOM: Head of Mission, LSU: Labour sending unit, PLF: Pacific Labour Facility, PLS: Pacific Labour Scheme. PALM support service line: 1800 51 51 31, email: support@pacificlabourfacility.com.au

050522

Source: Pacific Labour Facility

For example, a minor issue regarding pay should be discussed with the AE, then escalated to the labour sending unit (LSU), country liaison officer (CLO) and PLF if it cannot be resolved. High risk issues on the other hand, such as a critical injury or a criminal offence, must be reported to the PLF within 24 hours. Figure 5 provides details of the process and examples of the levels of risk.

Over the two-year period of 2 December 2020 to 5 December 2022, 1901 incidents were recorded by the PLF in Queensland, NSW and SA, with the majority categorised as ‘employment’. Table 8 shows that more than two-thirds of the cases (71.2%) related to employment. Of these, more than half were categorised as ‘end of employment’. Many of the cases in the ‘end of employment’ category appeared to relate to the worker disengaging from the place of employment. The most common categories after employment were ‘health’ (11.7%) and ‘behaviour’ (9.9%). With the latter, the majority of cases were categorised as negative conduct by the worker, such as violence and substance misuse. Many issues raised in interviews with workers and stakeholders were not frequently reported as incidents, such as deductions and accommodation, which indicates that such concerns were not reaching the attention of the PLF and may have been raised through other formal channels or with none of these.

Table 8: Type of incidents reported to the PLF, 2 December 2020 to 5 December 2022

Type of case	Percentage
Accommodation (e.g. house, facilities, rights and responsibilities)	1.7
Behaviour (e.g. violence, antisocial behaviour, drug and alcohol misuse, police engagement)	9.9
Employment (e.g. reduced hours, disengagement, redeployment, injury)	71.2
Financial (e.g. wages, deductions, tax, superannuation)	2.2
Health (e.g. mental health, physical health, pregnancy, health insurance)	11.7
Mobilisation (e.g. flights, pre-departure briefing, recruitment process)	0.7
Networks (e.g. diaspora, family and significant relationships, faith groups)	0.9
Personal Resources (e.g. passport, visa)	1.6
TOTAL	99.9

Source: PLF critical incident data

Positive feedback

While much of this chapter focuses on challenges experienced relating to safety and wellbeing, we want to stress that throughout this research project we also received a lot of positive feedback – from PALM scheme workers, community stakeholders and employers. Despite identifying challenges in their workplaces or with issues like the cost of living and missing their families, the majority of workers interviewed said they were glad they were in Australia and hoped to stay once their contract was complete. They explained their focus on making money to send home and to accumulate capital for homes and for their children’s education. Women with children spoke about the sacrifice they were making in the hope their children could have a better life. It was frequently acknowledged that there were few jobs or opportunities to make money ‘back home’. A number of women from Kiribati indicated they had more independence here and gave the example of owning and driving cars as something they would not have been able to do back home.

Some specific feedback from PALM scheme workers in our online survey free text field included:

In terms of well being and safety it is currently all good for us here...

I’m so grateful for this opportunity to work here in Australia

Just wanna thanks for the supports and the understanding and also this company.

It has been an honour and a privilege to be selected as one of those successful candidates, through the Partnership Agreement between the Government of Australia and Fiji... Its surely living a dream and stepping closer to that ambition that we always wish for... A Big Vinaka Vakalevu.

Nothing else, everything okay

I haven’t had experiences that threatens my safety and well-being so I wouldn’t know.

In interviews, AEs and host employers referred to how important the arrival of Pacific workers had been for their industry or workplace. It was stressed by representatives of abattoirs that they had a chronic shortage of employees during the height of the COVID-19 restrictions. For example, a human resources manager in one abattoir said their workforce was short by 80 workers in mid-2021, which was almost 20% of the total workforce. She said ‘everyone was grateful’ when the workers arrived from Solomon Islands. By mid-2022, one-quarter of the workforce were engaged through the PALM scheme, via a labour hire company, with almost all of them (88.6%) from Solomon Islands. A chair of a multicultural NGO said that COVID-19 had changed community and stakeholder perceptions of workers under the scheme, as they were struggling to find labour in the agricultural sector and the workers were no longer seen as taking jobs that should have been held by Australians.

Workplace safety and wellbeing

In the online surveys that we conducted, workers and stakeholders were asked to rank how much of a problem they thought different issues were. Table 9 shows the results of the workplace questions, which asked about employment issues, financial issues, workplace injuries and accommodation. The workers ranked employment issues as the biggest problem, while stakeholders felt that accommodation was the biggest problem. Many of the stakeholders were employers, so this likely reflects the housing crisis being experienced in Australia, and the difficulty that employers face in securing accommodation for their staff.

Table 9: Worker and stakeholder rankings of workplace issues, from the surveys

How much of a problem...	Workers’ perceptions		Stakeholders’ perceptions	
	Weighting	Ranking	Weighting	Ranking
Employment issues (e.g. pay, conditions, workplace conflict)	2.75	1	2.42	2
Financial issues	2.84	2	2.50	3
Workplace injury	2.92	3	2.82	4
Accommodation	3.02	4	2.13	1
Government agency	31.8	16.4	37.6	14.2
Island courts	28.2	12.4	30.2	29.1
Magistrate’s courts	27.2	11.5	30.7	30.6

Sources: Workers’ survey (n=303), Stakeholders’ survey (n=54)

Workplace safety

In terms of workplace safety, one issue that often came up is workplace injuries. One research participant told us that when a worker is injured at work, sometimes it is because they had not fully understood the risks of not properly following safety protocols set by the employer. This can be due to a lack of experience in the formal employment sector before coming to Australia.

Multiple people working in the meat processing industry told us they believed the weight of the products they were required to lift as part of their duties was unsafe. The concerns that were raised with us relating to workplace safety in the meat processing sector were consistent with other studies that mention injuries (Lynn and Holbeck 2022:10) and low levels of satisfaction in the meat processing sector due to the physically challenging nature of the job (Jeffress and Carnegie 2022:14).

Concerns regarding injury risk were not confined to the meat processing sector, however. A worker in the horticulture sector we spoke with was concerned about the risk of injury working in the packing shed. She is a single mother with her young child staying with relatives in her home country and said she often thinks about who would provide for her child if she became permanently disabled due to an injury at work. Based on our visits to horticulture workplaces, we saw that injuries can occur frequently and that injury management (e.g. moving injured staff to lighter duties) is a regular part of the operations.

Another issue that multiple workers raised was the challenge of obtaining information from their employer. For example, one worker had asked for their tax file number, which the employer had applied for on their behalf, but was unable to obtain it from their employer. Another worker understood that the employer had submitted a health insurance claim on her behalf, but never received the money and eventually gave up asking about it. This lack of trust and transparency can affect psychological safety.

An employer that we spoke to saw gender segregation as a measure to increase worker safety. The labour hire company that we spoke to said that their policy was to only bring groups of workers of the same sex for each host site. For example, a group of women for an aged care facility or a group of men for a meatworks site. They had decided this based on bad experiences of other employers and had made this policy because they believed it was the best way to keep the workers safe. Others however felt that this practice was discriminatory.

We're trying to keep them safe, productive, happy and achieving their goals. (INT48, approved employer, labour hire company)

In our online survey of PALM scheme workers we asked, 'Is there anything else you would like to tell us relating to safety and wellbeing of Pacific workers in Australia?' Some of the answers to this question were extremely concerning, and pertained to injury, abuse, unfair treatment and the anguish of women being separated from their children for long periods. Some

examples relating to the workplace are:

I just hope that all injuries whether small or big are looked into as we from the Pacific are here to support our family. If we are not able to work due to injury, then we will find it hard to repay [labour hire company name removed] for our airfare, visa and other stuff we are to repay.

Work place abuse (e.g. Forced to work even though you are sick and even if you have returned from the doctor with medical certificate they are going to ask silly questions that you are not feeling good about the working environment).

1. Employer put more pressure on staff when there's so much to be done but there's only few workers and they must tolerate high level of stress and exhaustion to complete additional tasks as a result many leaved their job. 2. Some people have skills, experience and talent which employer need to consider if not they leaved and find another job which they can be valued.

Yelling and shouting at workplace by superior

Agent did not look after Pacific people.

Safety and well-being must be priority in workplace

Pacific Islanders are not treated fairly

Safety training at work place

What we signed for is different from what we are getting

Yes. There are things I would like to add on and that is the unfair treatment and the workers exploitation by some employers. Some of them does not care about our welfare and can't even understand the fact that we are away from our family for so long that made it hard for us especially mothers to many children to cope with some family issues. Too many biased employers which is not right because they should be neutral in all their decisions.

Pay and hours of work

The number of hours of work and the rates of pay are both contentious issues that came up in many interviews with PALM scheme workers. Concerns raised with us by workers included:

- not getting enough hours of work
- not being paid the same rates as other workers who were not from the Pacific (especially in the meat processing industry)³
- not being paid enough.

Concerningly, one worker told us that normally they would be told to start work on arrival at the meat processing factory, but only be allowed to physically clock on a couple of hours later. Then their pay slips would reflect the clocked hours rather than actual hours worked. This particular worker told us that his employment had been terminated when he tried to raise this issue and other issues with management, and that he was labelled as a troublemaker.

Similarly, a short-term worker in the horticulture industry told us that she regularly was not paid for all the hours that she worked. For example, she said would work 30 hours per week, but then only be paid for 28 or 29 hours. She said when she queried it with her contact person at the labour hire company (the welfare officer), she was told it was a human resources (HR) issue and not their responsibility. The worker said she never got an appropriate response from HR.

Another worker in the meat processing industry told us of the frustration of being paid different rates on different days and was unable to obtain a satisfactory explanation from his employer:

We have a problem... we are paid different rates on different days. Sometimes \$27 (per hour) for two days of the week and the other two days is \$25 (per hour). The rate isn't stable. We know that it should be \$27 for the morning shift, but sometimes it's \$25. We ask at the office and they say go to see the supervisor. And when we ask the supervisor, he says go to the office. So there is nowhere else to go. (INT2, PALM scheme worker, meat processing industry, male, Queensland)

Where a disparity exists between PALM workers and other workers in meat processing facilities, this seems to be due to the latter being paid under an enterprise agreement while AEs are only required to pay the minimum award wage. Given the high proportion of temporary visa holders in the industry who are employed by labour hire companies, including PALM scheme workers, it is worth noting that currently only three states regulate labour hire companies. Queensland reputedly has the most rigorous regime.

One issue that was raised by multiple stakeholders was around additional expectations being placed on PALM scheme workers who are designated to drive other workers to work in the meat processing industry. These drivers receive no additional pay or compensation, but wake earlier than everyone else, at 3am for instance, to pick up workers from different houses. At the end of the day, they are responsible for dropping everyone back to their homes and are the last to finish work themselves. As a result, they are required to work more hours, but are only getting paid according to the clock on and clock off times at the factory. The counter argument from the employer is that it is cheaper if the workers drive each other, rather than having the employer organise and pay a driver which will lead to more deductions from their

pay. One stakeholder told us about a situation where a worker was told to drive the others to work even when he was sick, and his employment was terminated for refusing to do it.

Comments around pay also featured heavily in our online survey of PALM scheme workers:

Increase salary

We need to equal pay as those workers in factory because we have all done same job and at same time

Pay, improve pay asap!!!!

Yes we need to lift up our pay rate because it is a hard working we do every day but just only \$20.33 per hour right now but they said after 6 month so we change the rates

We need to get rid of \$21 rate and get into a new system of paying rate with is a maximum [sic] of \$25

Take extra care on working time

Workers needs to be paid fairly and more cover on Medicare plus permanent resident should be considered for workers based on good performance

Deductions

Deductions refer to the money that is deducted from workers' pay for costs such as their airfare, accommodation and transport to work. It is these deductions that can leave workers with very little take home pay (see for example Baker 12/9/2021). One stakeholder, someone with intimate knowledge of PALM scheme governance and critical incidents, told us that deductions are the biggest cause of tension between workers and employers.

Throughout our research we were told of different situations, including where:

- workers thought they were being overcharged, but they were not, and did not understand the deductions
- workers were overcharged but it was due to a genuine mistake because deduction administration is not a business priority for the employer
- employers were charging workers unreasonable amounts for deductions such as transport.

A common theme was a lack of good communication from all sides regarding the issue, which was in turn impacting on the wellbeing of workers. It was also sometimes complicated when family back home would get involved, questioning the worker about the money being sent home and adding to the pressure if the worker was not able to explain the details of the deductions.

There are also a lot of grey areas with deductions, particularly when the employer owns the vehicle that

provides transport, or the house that the workers rent. We commonly heard of workers being charged \$50 to \$70 per week for transport, which began to sound unreasonable when multiplied by 5 or 10 workers who share an old farm vehicle or van to get to work.

The PLF survey of long-term PALM workers found that deductions from wages, particularly having limited control over them, or being given poor explanation, was a common cause of worker dissatisfaction (Jeffress and Carnegie 2022:14).

One worker told us:

And our airfare deductions, it's too much. It just keeps going. If we ask for the total, they don't tell us. We should know when it will finish, but we don't. (INT2, PALM scheme worker, meat processing industry, male, Queensland)

The comments below from our online survey highlight the way PALM scheme workers see deductions and how they can be difficult to understand.

Fair treatment of PLS workers in Australia; rate issues, transport deductions, rentals.

Concerning deduction, I've been deducted for 42 weeks. The agreement we sign before we come was only 16 weeks. After we completed they gave us another 26 or some even 32 weeks deduction this cost us. We should arrive and staying in the house they arrange but not way we think. They put us in like rest house until we completed the 16 weeks before they can find a house for us to rent that's the time we will be added deducted for another 26 or 32 weeks more.

Not all of our discussions about deductions were negative. One worker that we interviewed said it was all very clear and that their labour hire company took the time to show them and explain to them exactly what they were deducting.

Additionally, a labour hire company that we spoke to was very cognisant of the issues, and said they are careful to make sure that workers have an adequate salary in their pocket each week. For example, they will not start deductions when the worker first arrives if they have not yet worked a full week. This type of extra care by employers may create an additional workload; however, it clearly has wellbeing benefits and avoids the stress of money not stretching far enough.

We were pleased to see over the course of our project that new factsheets were being released on deductions and are available in multiple languages.⁴

Employment terminations and disengagement

One gap identified by Pacific community members concerns responsibility when workers leave the program, which could be for different reasons. For example, if the

worker is terminated by their employer, ends up in jail, has a baby or can no longer work for medical reasons. Former workers in these situations seem to be falling through the gaps in terms of having adequate support for their wellbeing. One stakeholder told us that in some cases the former employer still provides some support, especially the smaller employers; however, those that were formerly with labour hire companies are less likely to be supported.

Workers who have lost their job can be left in limbo. Multiple interviewees told us about workers who were left to fend for themselves after being terminated from their employment by the employer. We were told of one worker who lived on the streets for a few months before hearing about a homeless shelter being run by the Salvation Army. Eventually, after spending some time at the shelter, he got in contact with one of the Pacific Island councils and was assisted to return home. One of our interviewees who was in direct contact with the worker said that the whole experience was traumatic and it damaged his mental health.

PALM scheme workers also asked for assistance via our online survey (we referred them on to appropriate support):

I have lost my job because of fake report, please help me to find another job.

My name is [removed], I was working with [removed] at [removed]. I got sacked from my employer, because of a silly mistake for which I wrote an apology letter. I was going to transfer to another meat company, which is in [removed]. The [removed] assistant manager is not helpful at all. It's one year already I haven't heard from [removed] at [removed]. Thank you for your time. Am still left without job so please help me thank you. Help.

The issue of workers breaching their contract conditions and leaving their approved employer (referred to as 'disengagement') was a topical matter. It was not included in our survey or interview questions as we were aware of a PLF study taking place on the subject, but it is something that many people raised with us voluntarily. The (then) Department of Education, Skills and Employment reported that 1181 seasonal workers disengaged in the 2020–21 financial year (Kelly 5/11/2021).

One Pacific community leader told us they believed that many workers were leaving their employers because of the poor conditions:

They pay \$150 per week to share a shipping container with other people. Is that really okay? When PowerPac⁵ collapsed, there were 30 to 40 people who didn't receive any pay for two to three months. The local church was supporting them with vouchers, but they had limited means. The labour hire companies push them to the

edge, that's why they run away. They can't live like that. (INT6, Pacific community leader, Queensland)

From our conversations, it seems that once some workers left their employer with no apparent consequences, the word spread so increasing numbers decided to try it. Some did not realise they were breaking the law; others did but calculated that the risk was worth it.

Another stakeholder told us:

I'd like to tell you about two scenarios. There was a direct employer who had good cause and lawful grounds terminate a worker. Upon terminating that worker, they booked him on a flight and drove him four hours to get to the airport (and then drove four hours to get back to their farm). They paid for the flight out of their own pocket and wrote off the deductions that were still owed to them. The situation ended there. That worker won't abscond.

Contrast that with what seems to be business as usual, particularly by labour hire companies. They literally send an email to the worker and say 'Your employment has finished for whatever reason. It's your responsibility to get on a plane and go home now. Let us know if you need any support to do that'. That worker now has options. Well, do I go home or do I look for a cash job or a different job in Australia? Technically the AE met their requirements under the deed, but the outcome is very different. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

We were told that the PLF is very aware of these issues and has been working to improve processes and procedures for when a worker is terminated or leaves their employment.

Workplace training and skills development

For some workers we interviewed, the key issue was that their pay did not increase in keeping with the skills they acquired through their work experience. One team leader in NSW who worked in an abattoir described how, after many months of negotiation, the Pacific workers were granted an increase to reflect the skills developed on the 'kill floor' and with boning. A crucial difference in this instance, according to the team leader, was when the abattoir manager became directly involved, rather than relying on the labour hire company to negotiate the wages.

Some workers in the meat processing industry assumed their requests to have a pay increase that reflected their greater skill and speed had been finally met when there was a rise in the minimum wage mid-2022. It demonstrated how workers can be uncertain about what is a fair wage for the work they do, and how to raise the issue in a constructive fashion with effective two-way communication.

Despite the announcement of a 'skills development program' under the PALM scheme,⁶ we encountered few workers who reported they were acquiring or had acquired formal qualifications through their work. Under the program, employers are offered funding to support workers to engage in formal training and gain qualifications. The availability of the support was promoted during the RAFs. However, among the workers we interviewed, there was no knowledge of such opportunities. One challenge with the skills development program is that it must be arranged by the employer who has to apply for the funding on behalf of workers and arrange the training provider. Several aged care workers that we spoke to had been keen to study for formal qualifications in aged care but were under the impression that they would need to pay for the study themselves. From the employers we spoke to, it seemed that not much training was being offered in relation to job skills and formal qualifications.

There was a range of questions raised by workers and stakeholders about the purpose and feasibility of providing training that led to formal qualifications. In theory, the upskilling can translate into skills that can be deployed back home, but very few workers saw their current job experience as having any relevance to employment back home. For example, a worker in the meat processing industry said they only knew of one commercial abattoir in the Pacific Island countries, in Fiji, but that it was nothing like the industrial scale of the meatworks in Australia. Another issue raised by a number of stakeholders was not seeing the value of investing in qualifications for workers who are temporary, potentially on short contracts and primarily engaged in unskilled labour occupations.

Several interviewees were frustrated that their past skills and qualifications were not being recognised once they reached Australia, or that they did not receive formal recognition and pay increases for skills acquisition in Australia through on-the-job experience. Relating to skills training, a comment that we received in our worker survey was:

If study could be allowed while staying in Australia. This is the only opportunity that Pacific people can get broaden their knowledge and get into their respective interested courses which get makes them start their own business when they get home. Study can guide us to get a better and more realistic in our future plan.

For us, it also raised questions about worker agency and the way they are reliant on the goodwill of their employer to be able to access this skills development program.

As Box 1 describes, we did encounter one AE — a company with operations in both Australia and PNG — that was purposely enabling skills development of workers over four years in Australia, with the explicit goal of the workers returning to PNG to use their skills and experience in the same sector.

Box 1: An AE that is building skills for a workforce back in the home country

A company that operates in PNG relies heavily on short-term labour hire of workers from the region, for example Indians and Filipinos, because of a shortage of local workers with the appropriate skills and experience. After becoming an AE in late 2021, the company plans to build up the number of PNG men who come to Australia under the PALM scheme, initially for a year and extending out to four years. In 2022, at the time of interview with the AE representative, there were nine PNG men placed in a range of positions in rural NSW and Queensland, with the aim to have up to 30 a year. The placements try to ensure there is a small group of PNG workers that can support each other without creating a large cohort in a single location that the interviewee said can lead 'to trouble' and is less 'imposing on the local community'. A six-month induction framework involves three webinars on driver safety, first aid and domestic violence, with the latter run by the police. Specific training needs are identified depending on the job. As an AE they provide accommodation or arrange accommodation at cost. Leave arrangements were being amended so that workers could return to PNG for a week each quarter with two weeks at Christmas. The interviewee described the approach as benefiting PNG, with a more skilled domestic workforce, and the workers, who were earning about \$700-\$800 a week as a trades assistant with approximately three-quarters of the earnings being sent home.

Personal safety and wellbeing

Individual problems

In both of the online surveys, with stakeholders and with workers, the same question was asked about how much of a problem the respondent considered five personal problems. Based on their answers, rankings were devised for the most common to the least common. Table 10 shows that workers and stakeholders agreed that 'extramarital affairs and relationship breakdowns' were the most common personal problems and that 'physical health' was the least common. However, the workers saw 'issues relating to children back home' as more of a problem than the stakeholders, while the stakeholders believed 'mental health' was a more common problem.

We also found that the perceptions varied by gender. For example, women were more likely to see all personal problems (Table 10) and all social issues (Table 11) as more of a problem. A stakeholder working closely with the scheme shared their view of the different challenges faced by men and women:

What we find is the males may have more incidences of workplace accidents and also might have more tendency to have behavioural issues, and that may be the result of alcohol use. But for women it's different, it's... more sensitive... incidents that they are seeing is more around sexual reproductive health, so pregnancy, or there might be violence inside or outside the workplace. (INT33, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

Health care

The Pacific Island countries have different systems and cultures relating to seeking health advice. We were told in interviews that most PALM scheme workers are not accustomed to a system of regular visits to a general practitioner (GP). They might seek herbal or local

Table 10: Ranking of personal problems based on workers' and stakeholders' perceptions

How much of a problem...	Workers' perceptions		Stakeholders' perceptions	
	Weighting	Ranking	Weighting	Ranking
Extramarital affairs/relationship breakdowns	2.65	1	1.9	1
Issues relating to children back home	2.72	2	2.65	4
Pregnancy	2.87	3	2.56	3
Mental health	3.13	4	2.49	2
Physical health	3.19	5	2.67	5

Sources: Surveys of workers (n=303) and stakeholders (n=54)

medicines in the first instance, but then visit a hospital if the issue was bad enough. This means that in Australia, workers are not seeking early support for health issues, and when they do, they sometimes go directly to a hospital for issues that might be better dealt with by a GP.

One employer said that the biggest wellbeing need of their workers was assistance with medical needs. For example, workers need assistance making appointments and getting taken to a doctor, which generally involves a drive to the next big town. One employer said they find it useful to have both male and female welfare staff supporting workers, as there may be a particular gender that they are more comfortable talking to, depending on the issue.

Primary health care in regional Australia is challenging for citizens, and even more so for PALM scheme participants who face additional challenges such as no access to Medicare, as well as cultural and language barriers in relation to accessing care. One representative from the health sector explained how Primary Health Networks assess community needs using Census data on population, cultural heritage, religion and language. This means that PALM scheme workers' needs are not considered.

It can be challenging for PALM scheme workers to access health care because of their work hours. If they are engaged on a casual basis, they will lose a day's pay to access care. Privacy and confidentiality are also issues because the worker is often reliant on their employer for transport and the employer would want to know why they need to go to town on a weekday. This makes it difficult for a worker to keep their medical history private.

One GP that we spoke to had serious concerns about the health care needs of the PALM scheme worker population in her area and the lack of resources available in the community to meet their needs. The GP felt they were already struggling to meet the needs of the remote Indigenous populations in their area and their resources were put under further pressure by the large number of PALM scheme workers. The GP was concerned about the high rates of pre-existing conditions and believed that better medical screening was required, potentially on arrival in Australia due to the sometimes basic nature of health care facilities in the Pacific. This would allow early identification and appropriate care for health concerns.

Health insurance

All PALM scheme participants are required to have private health insurance, which is in line with the requirements for other temporary visa categories in Australia. NIB is the 'preferred provider' of health insurance under the PALM scheme. NIB obtained this status by going through a tender process. Many workers and stakeholders spoke about holding IMAN insurance. IMAN was acquired by NIB in 2010. Employers select and take out health insurance policies on behalf of their workers and deduct the premium from their pay.

Our research found that, in general, PALM scheme participants did not have a good understanding of the

health insurance system. Many did not know how to access it or how to make a claim, and some were not even aware that they hold health insurance. Multiple government health providers (hospitals and community health services) told us about PALM scheme workers presenting for medical issues and not knowing if they hold health insurance.

Our findings align with the results of the PLF's most recent health and wellbeing survey which found that respondents often indicated that they did not understand what was covered by their health insurance, why they had to pay up front for costs, and why in some instances only a percentage of the cost was reimbursed. The PLF also found that almost 10% of survey respondents did not know that they had health insurance (Lynn and Holbeck 2022).

One worker we interviewed said she paid \$80 for a doctor's appointment and was told by her employer that she would get a \$40 refund, but said she never received it. A stakeholder that we interviewed said:

Health care is a big issue affecting worker wellbeing. Some of the exclusions of private health insurance are not helpful for workers here on a 9-month contract. Within the 12-month waiting period, there is no cover for pregnancy and childbirth and no cover for any pre-existing medical conditions. (INT21, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

From our discussions it appears there is a tension between providing a product that is affordable and keeps deductions to a minimum, while also making sure that the product has good coverage and meets the needs of PALM scheme workers.

Mental health

Mental health is a topic that was raised by stakeholders including employers and Pacific diaspora community members. One Pacific service provider told us:

Pacific wellbeing needs to be addressed holistically. It needs to include cultural, social, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing. When all of these needs aren't being met, it impacts on the mental health of workers. (INT14, Pacific service provider, Queensland)

Mental health support has become a mainstream issue in Australia in recent years; however, in many Pacific Island countries, it is not something that is readily recognised nor something that people are accustomed to seeking help for. Mental health services in Australia can be difficult to access, particularly in regional areas. PALM scheme workers face additional barriers in accessing support, including the fact that they do not have access to Medicare-sponsored mental health care plans. There are also barriers around not knowing what support services are available or what kind of help to ask for. Accessing help can be even more difficult for people who have experienced trauma, which would be common in

Pacific populations due to the high rates of violence (for example, violence against children in the Pacific has been described as endemic; Save the Children et al. 2019:4).

PALM scheme workers do have access to some mental health services through their health insurance, including GP consultations and hospital psychiatric services. NIB does also have modules on their app which provide education, tools and techniques to support anxiety, stress and mental health concerns.

Many stakeholders spoke about the intense pressure that PALM scheme workers experience, including pressure from family back home to be successful, make good money and send that money back. We were told that some workers are selected collectively by their village to come to Australia and are expected to contribute money towards a village project. This can create additional pressure that can contribute to mental health challenges.

One person who works closely with workers told us that wellbeing is based around having a life in Australia that enables participants to remit a good amount of money back home:

My experience has been that when their ability to send money to their family is disrupted, then the whole purpose of them leaving their own country making those sacrifices is not fulfilled. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

Tragically, we are aware that a number of workers have committed suicide while in Australia.

An employer spoke to us about their frustrations regarding how a mental health crisis needs to be addressed quickly but that when a worker was suffering from a mental health issue they found it very difficult to find help, saying it took months. One respondent from our worker survey simply said:

Offer counselling sessions

Sexual and reproductive health

Numerous stakeholders mentioned a need for more education and appropriate support services regarding sexual and reproductive health. We did not include specific questions about this topic in our interview schedule, but it quickly became clear that it was something that stakeholders were concerned about, and that is having a negative impact on worker safety and wellbeing. These are sensitive issues that are not openly discussed in many Pacific cultures, so there is a need to approach any solutions with great care and cultural awareness.

A sexual health service provider told us that PALM scheme workers are very reluctant to talk about anything relating to sex and sexual health, even when they are presenting with a pregnancy:

And before you can even have that conversation, there's so much shame to even talk about sex, right, which we know has happened because there's a pregnancy. But to even just culturally

broach anything around consent, contraception as an ongoing choice... it's difficult. (INT20, Health service provider, Queensland)

Some related topics that stakeholders raised with us included diagnoses of cervical cancer among PALM scheme women (and lack of knowledge of and access to cervical screening tests), menstrual hygiene and knowledge of menstrual products available in Australia. Furthermore, sexual health nurses reported seeing high rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among PALM scheme workers, including chlamydia and gonorrhoea. One employer told us that some workers arrive with STIs which have not been treated. It takes time for workers to understand the systems in Australia, work out who they can trust and have the courage to seek advice and treatment when required. We found that PALM scheme workers did not have adequate information on safe sexual practices and how and where to seek support for STIs.

Related to this is the subject of contraception, which again is often not discussed or readily accessible in the Pacific (see Durrant and Ryan 19/9/2022). This means that PALM scheme workers who come to Australia have limited knowledge regarding modern contraception methods and how to access them. A sexual health nurse told us:

Reproductive planning...these are pretty foreign concepts for a lot of people from these island nations. There's an expectation then from some of the health services that contraception should be offered for everyone when they arrive. But there's a lot of people who do not even understand what they would be consenting to. And that's a real safety concern for us as health professionals. (INT56, Health service provider, Queensland)

Another interviewee told us:

Due to conservative religious values, women would be in terrible trouble at home if people found out they accessed contraception. (INT54, Union delegate, Queensland)

Pregnancy and childbirth

When workers become pregnant, additional administrative complexities arise and their health, emotional and financial wellbeing is impacted. There is a 12-month waiting period for pregnancy and birth related services under the NIB health insurance (NIB 2022) so workers on short contracts generally cannot access any private health rebates.

In one NSW town, we were told of discriminatory practices where an abattoir had stopped employing women under the scheme because, in a year, more than three women became pregnant, which had led to difficulties for the women workers and for the AE and host employer.

An NGO service provider said that she had heard of men ending the relationship when they found out the

woman was pregnant and that there was an increased likelihood of domestic violence when a woman is pregnant as ‘there is a ripple effect ... emotional abuse, woman stops work, man drinks’. One SWP worker told us about her friend, another SWP worker, who became pregnant and was ‘sent home’ by their employer. She felt it was unfair because while her friend had to go home, nothing happened to the man.

Stakeholders told us of numerous cases where PALM scheme workers became pregnant, intended to keep the baby, but had no antenatal care or engagement with health services until the birth of the child. They also spoke of the gendered inequalities associated with giving birth.

I would be able to think of at least 10 occasions where the narrative that we’ve heard is that the birth of the child itself was actually quite a surprise, they didn’t even realise they were so far along. They might have thought that they were 12 weeks along, and then all of a sudden, they go into labour.

I’ve been involved in a number of cases where a child has been born to a PLS worker. That’s a really complicated thing. They’re often the result out of extramarital affairs and that has consequences for the woman back home, which are outsized against consequences for the man. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

Other challenges that were raised with us by community workers and PLF staff included obtaining passports for babies born to PALM scheme workers in Australia, not having access to Medicare funded pregnancy and birth services, and not being in a position to care for the baby which results in adoption (which raises questions about duty of care for children born to PALM scheme workers). Due to these complexities, we were told that some employers are thinking twice about employing women at all.

Termination of pregnancy

The key issues that were brought to our attention relating to terminations of pregnancy included unclear service pathways, high cost due to lack of access to Medicare or private health rebates, cultural disapproval, and limited resources and staff with appropriate skills. A member of a Pacific diaspora organisation told us:

Accessing terminations in Australia is not only challenging due to language and structural barriers, but also because of certain cultural and religious beliefs around termination in the Pacific islands. (INT14, Pacific community worker, Queensland)

We found that the process for accessing a pregnancy termination is often unclear, and differs even between regions of the same state. The care pathways differ depending on how far along the woman is in the

pregnancy and if a medical or surgical termination is required. We were told of PALM scheme women being given hospital bills for between \$2000 and \$4000 for surgical terminations of pregnancy, and of community health workers who advocate on behalf of workers for fees to be waived on compassionate grounds. In one location we were told that a PALM scheme worker had presented to the hospital emergency department with an unwanted pregnancy, which meant she had to pay \$300 to access a medical termination, a service which would have cost \$60 if she had visited her GP.

One government health provider told us they had concerns that when employers are involved, they did not always provide the worker with the best option:

We have concerns that the employer tries to control which service the worker accesses, and which pathway they take to a termination. We have pathways within the health service that we think are actually set up better for the client or where we will provide a free ultrasound and free pathology. But these agencies seem to have relationships with the private providers, and they will actually pay ahead of the consult on behalf of the seasonal worker and then they will deduct that from their pay. And this has been brought to our attention quite a few times where they’ve paid \$600 for things that that state government would have actually done for free. (INT20, Health service provider, Queensland)

One stakeholder told us about the challenge women can face if the community knows about a termination:

Extramarital affairs happen all the time but it’s the woman who can get pregnant and who has to face the cultural taboos in terms of terminating a pregnancy. I’ve seen women shamed and isolated within their community of peers and other workers. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

With regard to staffing and resourcing, we are told that some services are quite stretched in terms of being able to provide services to the large number of workers in the regions. For example, a sexual health service told us they had a request from a farm to come onsite and provide sexual and reproductive health prevention screening for 500 workers. Although they wanted to provide support, they said they needed additional funding to be able to conduct such a huge logistical exercise, and that it was further complicated by the fact that pathology services could not be billed through Medicare.

In addition to resources, sexual health providers also raised the issues of availability of staff with culturally appropriate skills. One service told us they found that using their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff was helpful when engaging with workers from the Pacific, but that it would be even better to have staff of Pacific heritage to liaise with workers.

Availability of translators is mentioned in Chapter 3 and one sexual health provider said that, in their view, some translators (engaged through state health systems) can be biased. They said that the translator does not always translate directly and that it is clear that the translator's own cultural values are coming into play; for example, encouraging the woman to keep the baby rather than proceed with a termination.

Family separation

Speaking with stakeholders highlighted the difficult decisions and sacrifices that are made by Pacific Islanders when deciding to participate in the scheme:

A common issue we see relates to the challenge of being separated from family. It could be being away from your wife or your husband. That's a common issue affecting wellbeing. (INT15, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

The decision is more complicated when children are involved and need to be left in the care of someone other than a parent. While taking part in the PALM scheme will likely have clear economic benefits, parents are forced to weigh up the possible implications for the safety and wellbeing of their children.

We were told of many single mothers who leave their children with their parents (the child's grandparents). One stakeholder recounted the case of a woman who left her children with her parents at home to come to Australia but the parents became sick and could no longer care for her children. Her employer told her that there was nothing that they could do and that she was not able to leave. She contacted one of the Pacific community organisations for support in raising the issue with authorities and with their intervention she was able to return home and take care of her children.

A PLF survey of long-term PALM workers found that workers missing their families was cited as a major cause of lower levels of satisfaction (Jeffress and Carnegie 2022:14). Our online survey of PALM scheme workers also elicited a range of responses relating to family separation when we asked if there was anything additional that they would like to share:

Yes I want work together with my family

Pacific workers in Australia should bring their families too

If we can just get husband and wife working here to work together and stay together in the same city or state would have been much appreciated, thank you.

Thank you so much only to let you know why we're here it's just sacrificing ourself for our family back in the island.

Family distance is one of the draw backs we face. Our contracted hours need to increase and our pay and (less) tax deduction.

Applying for a relationship Visa

Deaths

While death in any circumstance is a tragedy, the situation can be additionally complex when a foreign national dies while working temporarily in Australia. A Pacific community worker told us about the difficult situations they have been faced with, particularly if the worker had left their employer for some reason and then passed away. In these cases, their insurance has lapsed and the responsibility falls to the diaspora to step in and help raise money to repatriate the body.

Another member of the Pacific diaspora told us about her challenging experience when her friend, a PALM scheme worker, died in a car accident. She said the lack of information was agonising:

It was mental torture. I didn't know who to reach out to. It was really hard. This guy was like my little brother. We didn't know what was going to happen to the body, if it was going to be sent home or not. (INT7, member of Pacific diaspora, Queensland)

Accommodation

Lack of sufficient and appropriate accommodation is a problem in regional areas across the nation. The issue affects overseas workers and Australian community members alike. During our research, we came across PALM scheme workers who were housed in a variety of accommodation types, including houses, apartments, backpacker hostels, caravan parks, cabins, 'dongas', caravans and shipping containers.

In one regional centre, we were told of racist attitudes of community members, which was interrelated with the pressure in the housing sector:

People used to say that these people from Vanuatu are coming here and taking our jobs. Now, with the housing crisis, they say they are taking our houses too. (INT27, local government representative, Queensland)

We also found some gendered differences relating to accommodation. Female SWP workers in one regional location told us that they were sharing a house with males and did not feel safe, particularly because they could not lock their bedroom doors and felt scared when the men came home drunk at night. Pacific community members told us that it was not culturally appropriate for women and men to be accommodated together in share-houses unless they are in a relationship.

Other research participants told us about how women are being prioritised in term of accommodation. For example, if there is only a certain amount of housing, and some workers need to be accommodated in a donga, generally the men are put in dongas and the women are put in houses.

Respondents to our online workers' survey mentioned the following with regards to accommodation:

The apartment is our problem

Box 2: Perspective of an accommodation provider

I'm kind of the forgotten cousin of this whole apparatus. If you look around the country, a lot of the problems that these guys are impacted by and a lot of where the issues come up from dodgy operators are around accommodation, but the accommodation providers aren't often invited to the table.

We have 450 beds over 3 locations and 70% of those are occupied by Pacific Islanders. These guys spend most of their time at the accommodation and I deal with a lot of the cultural differences, the frustrations from being away from home, a lot of the stresses that come from casual employment and alternating pay weeks, the complaints about 'where's my money going?' A lot of that, I'm at the face of it.

I feel like I'm responsible and accountable for a lot of their welfare and pastoral care because there can be a real disconnect between how we as Australians live and how our buildings are built to support how we live and then how they live and what they're used. There's a lot of challenges in that.

All of our premises get inspected by the department. They come in and they check if we have blackout curtains and they count the teaspoons in the drawer and they count number of dining chairs. All of this arbitrary stuff. They tell us you've got to have couches and dining tables and a lot of the time, the first thing they guys do when they move into a unit is they push it all against the wall and roll out mats on the floor. They take down the blackout curtains. But we've got to have all that [profanity removed] in there and then keep it there because someone might come around and count it at some point.

And I have been smashed with all sorts of compliance since the Senate inquiry. The AEs are scared of their own shadow and afraid to do anything. There's been so much heat on us like we're the bad guys. How dare you run a business off the back of these guys?

People complain that we charge \$165 per week per room, but I've got a lot of expenses. I also need to keep my business afloat during the off season, so that the beds are there when the guys come back for the peak season. We've got to pay cleaners, we've got linen, we've got insurance, we've got to pay rates, we've got rent, we've got all this other stuff that someone who's licensed has to comply with.

Late last year, we had an accident in one of our bedrooms. The guy managed to do some kind of triple twist pike off the top bunk and caught his eye on a ceiling fan. He was out of work and nearly lost his eye. But we've got insurance, so he's been looked after under insurance. You don't get that if you go to a share house down the road.

We have free Wi-Fi and free laundry and free recreation areas. We've got swimming pools and volleyball courts, and we're just getting a couple more pool tables. There's ping pong tables and dart boards. There's stuff for them to go and do, which is important.

Accommodation really is key. It doesn't matter how many jobs you can find in the town; if you can't get beds for these guys, it doesn't matter how much work is available. They've got to go home every night and sleep somewhere.

Worker satisfaction is extremely high with an AE who really invests in pastoral care. And it's really low where they're just getting through work every day and there's no activities for them and they don't even celebrate the cultural days. We've got an AE who sends their pastor around every Sunday and they'll do a service wherever they are. The pastor will go there, and that's really important for them culturally. We're trying to get to the point where we can have the time to tie in with the AE on pastoral care, run barbecues and even cooking classes. Take them on trips on the buses on the weekend, see different areas, things like that.

But so much of our time is taken up with compliance. I really do think the department has their priorities a bit askew. I've never once for example been asked to provide my fire safety management plan or my insurance. Never. It's always the blackout curtains and how many teaspoons are in the drawer. I'm not kidding.

There's a caravan park out near [name of town] that is an absolute [profanity removed]-hole. It's a meth lab. And there's Pacific Islanders living there because they're only charged 100 bucks a week. It's not a good place but it's close to the work. There's stray cats, there's drugs, there's problems. The accommodation is abominable, it's unsanitary. But they'll stay there because it's cheap. But are they happy there? Are they healthy? There's no support. There's no love. There's no care. That's where resources could be better spent, looking after actual welfare of people.

Accommodation is very important for our wellbeing during our work here in Australia, both in mental and social health and it's our home.

Wellbeing especially accommodation issues have took too long to fix or not fixed by responsible authorities.

Box 2 outlines the perspective of one accommodation provider, who described himself as the 'forgotten cousin of the whole apparatus'. Stakeholders spoke about the integral role that some accommodation providers play given the amount of contact they have with workers, which can be much more frequent than the labour hire company that engaged them.

Social issues and harms

In our online surveys, we asked about six social problems: drinking too much alcohol, other drugs (e.g. marijuana), dangerous driving, interpersonal conflict (e.g. arguments), men hurting women, and other (non-gender-based violence) types of fighting. When workers' perceptions were compared with stakeholders' perceptions regarding these problems, the ranking of the most common to the least common are similar (see Table 11). 'Drinking too much alcohol' was viewed as the most common by both groups, and 'men hurting women' the least common. Where they differed was in relation to drugs other than alcohol, which was ranked higher by the workers, and 'interpersonal conflict' which was ranked higher by the stakeholders.

It is likely that the stakeholders are less aware of drug use than the workers, as problems associated with such use may be less visible and not evident in public settings. Another factor is that because of the wording of the option we do not know what kind of drug use was being referred to by the workers: it could, for example, include kava use. Seeing something as 'a problem' may refer to its perceived prevalence rather than a source of personal or social harm.

Alcohol

Some community organisation representatives told us that alcohol abuse was one of the biggest issues affecting worker wellbeing. Members of the Pacific diaspora pointed to underlying systemic issues that can lead to alcohol use, with a belief that PALM scheme workers turn to alcohol use and abuse because of a lack of strong relationships. Others noted that for some workers it is their first exposure to alcohol, and that they are affected by local influences where there can be 'drinking culture in a town'. There was general agreement that alcohol is a substance that can create or contribute to social issues such as extramarital affairs, and crimes such as drink driving, assault, sexual assault and domestic violence.

Wellbeing risks and challenges to workers tend to be tied into alcohol consumption... we see a range of incidents, whether that's violence

amongst peers, domestic violence amongst people in relationships or families, or incidents of drink driving and motor vehicle accidents. All of those things tend to have their root in alcohol and substance abuse. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

One comment from the online survey of workers stated:

Yes, alcohol consumption contributes to the problems Pacific Islanders faces, both mentally and financially.

Driving

One area of concern regarding safety of workers is driving. Even when workers arrive with a licence from their home country, often additional training and upskilling is needed to adapt to the driving conditions and road rules in Australia. We were also told of the possibility of workers having 'bought' their licence back home without actually knowing how to drive at all.

There is variation across employers regarding how much support is given regarding driving skills. One labour hire company that we spoke to said it provides driver training from a formal driving school for all of its employees when they arrive in Australia; they see it as essential for keeping the workers safe. At the other end of the spectrum, a stakeholder told us about a driver being given a two-hour briefing, then being expected to drive in the capital city to pick up workers and take them to the factory. The driver got lost on day one.

The PLF has funded defensive driving courses, and driving training is also available through the Skills Development Program. However, the challenge for employers is managing time for workers to complete this type of training. The workers either need to take time off, or do it in work time. One employer said:

...then you need to line up a time when the driving instructor can come out (from a larger centre to a rural area), when the worker isn't needed at work. So it's a lot of organising and

Table 11: Ranking of personal problems based on workers' and stakeholders' perceptions

How much of a problem is...	Workers' perceptions		Stakeholders' perceptions	
	Weighting	Ranking	Weighting	Ranking
Drinking too much alcohol	2.58	1	1.79	1
Dangerous driving	2.66	2	2.27	2
Other drugs (e.g. marijuana)	2.89	3	2.82	5
Other (non-GBV) types of fighting	2.99	4	2.69	4
Interpersonal conflict (e.g. arguments)	3.00	5	2.51	3
Men hurting women	3.11	6	2.82	=5

Sources: Surveys of workers (n=303) and stakeholders (n=54)

back and forth. (INT28, approved employer, labour hire company)

Some stakeholders called for a system where PALM scheme workers would need to pass theoretical and practical tests before driving in Australia; however, this would be difficult to implement, given that each state and territory has its own regulations regarding overseas drivers.

Relationships and extramarital affairs

Some community members that we spoke to felt that extramarital affairs and associated relationship breakdowns were some of the biggest wellbeing problems affecting workers. This was also reflected in the worker and stakeholder surveys, with extramarital affairs being ranked as the biggest issue (see Table 10). We were told by a Pacific community worker in Queensland that although workers may have a partner and family back home, it is common to get involved in new relationships after being apart for months or years. A community worker in NSW said:

It's not surprising that new relationships are formed among workers in Australia when wives and husbands are at home, and they work in close contact.
(INT65, community worker, NSW)

Criminal behaviour

In terms of PALM scheme workers committing criminal offences, stakeholders said offending was often linked to alcohol abuse, and some mentioned drink driving, fighting and domestic violence. Although we were told of some workers who have been convicted of serious crimes, stakeholders thought crimes were mostly low level. This perception is supported by the PLF critical incident data for Queensland, NSW and SA that showed that less than 10% of reported incidents related to negative behaviour (see Table 8), and of these only a small percentage were recorded as involving 'police engagement'. Further information on criminal behaviour is mentioned in the following section on violence against women.

Violence against women

Our interviews and surveys revealed that some women participating in the PALM scheme experience violence, which may include intimate partner violence, controlling behaviours and/or sexual violence.

The online surveys asked workers and stakeholders how big of a problem they believe 'men hurting women' is. For the worker responses (n=295), 13.9% said it was a very big problem, 8.1% big problem, 8.8% small problem, 44.1% not a problem and 25.1% said they did not know. For the stakeholder responses (n=53), 11.3% said it was a very big problem, 24.5% said big problem, 30.2% small problem, 30.2% not a problem and 3.8% chose not applicable.

Table 12 below shows the results when responses of male and female workers who participated in the survey were compared. It shows that the 72 female participants were more likely to see 'men hurting women' as more of a problem than the 219 male participants.

Almost a third of women workers (31.9%) saw it as a big or very big problem, compared with less than a fifth of the men workers (18.3%); however, 38.9% of women said it was not a problem at all. It was noticeable that the men were more likely to indicate that they did not know how big the problem was – 27.4% for men compared with 19.4% for women. The weighted average for the women's responses was 2.83 compared with that for men, 3.23.

Different forms of violence against women came up in interviews. One stakeholder said:

So yes, I suppose domestic violence, it's not as visible in the program as assault or sexual assault, but I have seen a few instances of DV.
(INT23)

Although domestic and family violence (DFV) were not a distinct category in PLF incident data that we were provided (see Table 8), we were told:

There's a lot of domestic violence cases that we've dealt with. Many of those do go through

Table 12: Workers' perceptions of how big a problem is 'men hurting women', by gender, number and percentage

Men hurting women is...	Women workers		Men workers	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Very big problem	15	20.8	24	11.0
Big problem	8	11.1	16	7.3
Small problem	7	9.7	19	8.7
Not a problem	28	38.9	100	45.7
Don't know	14	19.4	60	27.4
TOTAL	72	99.9	219	100.1

Source: Workers' online survey

to a sort of a police involvement scenario. What complicates that is, compared to a typical Australian context, that the woman in that relationship may not have the networks, the freedoms, that sort of thing to get away from that person who is perpetrating the violence. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

In one situation that was described to us by an approved employer welfare officer, the domestic violence constituted controlling behaviours perpetrated by the husband in the home country, against the woman who was working in Australia. He reputedly tells her via Messenger what to do and what not to eat, and threatens to take the children away from her (he is looking after them). The woman was very 'isolated, not going anywhere, not even to church'. He had heard how her fellow workers and housemates were helping her, and there had been a 'backlash', that is, there were consequences for the housemates who had tried to assist.

According to a former PLF case manager, during the COVID-19 restrictions a trial was conducted of bringing over couples from Tonga to one regional centre in NSW. But there was a lot of domestic violence, and people were not aware of the laws here. In one case, the man assaulted his wife in the workplace. Back in Tonga it would be seen as a 'home' matter. The trial was ended once restrictions eased.

Other PLF staff members provided additional perspectives:

Although there is DFV legislation in place in many Pacific Island countries, it's reasonably new in most countries and there isn't a culture of reporting DFV, or of law enforcement when it is reported. So we need to do more work around raising awareness of what is and isn't acceptable behaviour in Australia. (INT33, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

Even if a woman knows about domestic violence orders in Australia, there is probably a lot of fear about going down that sort of process, fear of what it might mean for her own visa. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

In terms of responses to violence, an example was given of an employer in Victoria who took the time to address domestic violence that was occurring between a couple who were both workers. The employer spent time with both, gave them space to be apart, reached out to a pastor, and asked advice from a team leader. The church provided support.

Workplace sexual harassment

It has been documented that although temporary migrant women on farms are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment, it is nearly impossible for legal action to be taken against perpetrators (Howe et al.

2022:1140). The same study notes that seasonal workers from the Pacific are vulnerable to sexual harassment due to their immigration status, and that they are unlikely to report it because they are dependent on their employers for remuneration, for sponsorship to remain in Australia and to return for future harvest seasons (Howe et al. 2022:1160).

Our study did not ask specific questions about sexual harassment, but one worker did write in the online survey:

There's a lot of sexual harassment issues and cases that are not handled properly and look into.

Sexual assault

We spoke to two sexual health services for this research and both told us that they know of women working in the PALM scheme who have been coerced into sex. This was revealed when women were presenting with unwanted pregnancies, as sexual health staff are required to ask whether the sex was consensual. The sexual health staff told us:

In the case of non-consensual sex, we have a really good sexual assault service, and we explain the options and the pathway. To date, no one has wanted to pursue it further with police or another agency. We screen for domestic violence and reproductive coercion, but there is a cultural difference and not always a shared understanding of the definitions of those things. There are definitely cases of sexual coercion, but we don't feel like we're always able to get the full story. (INT20, Health service worker)

A different stakeholder told us:

There are some pretty extreme examples of sexual assault... I suppose some of these instances are just the product of having 30 or 40 Pacific Island men located in the same town. So they share the same women. And some of it is agreeable. Some of it's not agreeable. It's unrealistic to think that the employers can regulate this behaviour. But yeah, it does rear its ugly head in many ways. (INT23)

An SWP worker said:

The Islander men, they drink, harass the women. They knock on the door of caravan late at night when they are drunk. (INT4, female, SWP worker)

Other occurrences of sexual assault that interviewees spoke about included allegations of sexual assault by local Indigenous women against PALM scheme men, criminal convictions and incarceration of workers resulting from a home invasion involving sexual assault, and multiple separate incidences of assault of sex workers.

Chapter 2 Conclusion

Research participants expressed to us the importance of the bonds that are formed with fellow countrymen and countrywomen, as well as the intrinsic link between culture and wellbeing. Sometimes the weakening of these bonds, compounded with being in a foreign environment, contributes to the range of individual and social issues affecting PALM scheme workers in Australia, and raised during the study. The fact that workers are often struggling or not happy is indicated by a large number of incidents recorded by the PLF related to workers who have disengaged. According to workers, challenges in the workplace included injuries, perceived unfairness around pay and deductions, and the perceived lack of opportunities for skills training. The biggest personal problem out of a list of five, according to workers who participated in the online survey, was extramarital affairs and relationship breakdowns, which was also ranked by stakeholders as the biggest problem. Although both the workers and the stakeholders surveyed agreed that drinking too much alcohol was the biggest social problem (out of a list of six problems), the difference between the two in perceptions of drug use underlines the importance of stakeholders checking to see if their assumptions match what workers say they experience. Our study found that workers face challenges in accessing health care, as well as understanding and utilising their mandatory private health insurance policies. Sexual and reproductive health is an area that many workers need support with, but it is additionally fraught due to it being a culturally taboo topic. Research participants relayed many concerning stories to us regarding sexually transmitted infections, contraception, childbirth and terminations of pregnancy. PALM scheme workers find themselves in difficult situations due to alcohol, gambling, dangerous driving, extramarital affairs and committing crimes. Gendered differences in experiences have been discussed throughout the chapter, including some concerning attitudes, discriminatory practices and incidents relating to recruitment, accommodation, intimate partner violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault.



PALM scheme workers
Photograph courtesy of Queensland Berries

Chapter 3 — Research findings — Access to support

Chapter 3 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the findings that relate to workers' access to support. It begins by focusing on the initiatives that the schemes have introduced and modified over time with the aim of improving workers' knowledge of what to expect in Australia. This relates to both within and outside the workplace, and includes enabling access to sources of advice or redress if the workers encounter problems. The chapter then describes the different facets of the scheme that support worker welfare, including mechanisms that have been put in place by employers, the federal employment department and the Pacific Labour Facility. The chapter also presents key issues that emerged in relation to the current provision of information and formal support, and where workers actually seek help and support. To provide a detailed picture of the nature of concerns, what is available and how support is accessed at a local level, the chapter includes an in-depth case study of the meat processing industry in NSW. It is pertinent as the majority of workers under the PLS (and subsequently the PALM long-term stream), have been engaged in this industry over the past few years.

Inductions and information and training

An integral element to being able to cope with new and challenging conditions is being aware of what to expect, knowing what is required of you and what can be done and accessed if there are personal or wider problems. Under the PALM scheme, workers are provided with pre-departure and on-arrival information sessions to familiarise themselves with the scheme and with life and work in Australia. They should ideally also receive ongoing on-the-job training as well as access to professional and personal development activities.

Pre-departure preparation

In terms of pre-departure briefing, there was a sense among some stakeholders that the briefings were often inadequate, and it was implied that better preparation leads to a better experience and being better prepared for potential issues that can affect safety and wellbeing. Some compared the short briefings under this program to pre-departure preparation for Australia Awards (university scholarship) participants who receive a three-week pre-departure program.

The length and content of the pre-departure briefings seemed to vary by country, by program (for example, PLS or SWP) and the point in time that it was delivered. For example, a SWP worker said he only had a one-hour pre-departure briefing in Port Moresby, which covered general information like the names of the employer and welfare officer, who would meet the workers at the airport, and the name and cost of accommodation. A stakeholder and a member of the diaspora was critical of the quality and content of the pre-departure briefings, especially if delivered by people who had no direct experience of Australian life in rural and regional areas.

It was also felt by some stakeholders that prospective workers are not made properly aware of the conditions of employment and the deductions that will be made once they are in Australia. According to a stakeholder working closely with the scheme, a big issue was workers not understanding the nature of the work and the details of their contracts. This staff member argued that even if these are explained at the pre-departure briefing, they need to be reinforced again on arrival, and on an ongoing basis.

A survey of SWP employers in 2017 found that employers felt that worker preparation could be improved through better English language skills, budgeting and financial management skills and better understanding of requirements about living in Australia (Cardno 2017). Our research revealed that the same challenges remain.

Communication materials and information sessions after arrival in Australia

A lot of responsibility is put on employers to care for new workers upon arrival and prepare them for their employment and life in Australia. Workers described being met at the airport, being given a meal, then driven to wherever in the country they were going to work. The employer arranges accommodation, although we did hear of many instances of workers being placed in temporary and expensive short-term accommodation while awaiting more longer-term placement in shared houses and units. During the first few days, the onus is on the employers to make arrangements for opening bank and phone accounts, and in some contexts, having a medical appointment. This kind of orientation and practical assistance is then extended into the workplace, either with training undertaken (for example, in the meat processing industry) or the worker being expected to learn on the job.

Workers in interviews admitted there was a lot to take in during the first few weeks in Australia. Many had left their home countries with only a short period of time to prepare for their departure. Stakeholders questioned how much information workers are able to effectively absorb during this period. One stakeholder in Australia stressed the different styles of communication that meant Australians were not effectively conveying information, and how the level of education of many workers affects comprehension:

One thing that I found out... is that you can't talk to a Pacific Island national about an employment agreement the same way that you talk to an Australian citizen. So, different Pacific Island cultures aren't very upfront with asking questions. But then there's also basic gaps around literacy and numeracy and an understanding of working for an Australian employer. (INT23)

Over the course of our research, we saw the PALM scheme website progressively updated with a range of written resources, including information for workers in a range of languages.⁷ Topics covered by the resources included many of the issues being raised with us such as payroll deductions, driver licensing, health insurance and mental health. We were also told that fact sheets are being developed on sex and consent, sexual health, domestic and family violence, sexual harassment, pregnancy and parenting.

Fact sheets are a welcome addition, but as one interviewee put it:

They know how to read, but they don't read. Doing and seeing things is the thing. For health education, you need to visit them and talk to them. They remember more that way. We are Pacific Islanders, we're more practical, we don't read. (INT13, Pacific diaspora member and nurse, Queensland)

Worker welfare arrangements in Australia

In terms of welfare of PALM scheme participants while they are in Australia, the arrangements have slightly differed for the SWP and PLS. Here we describe the situation at the time this study was undertaken in 2022.

The SWP has been administered by the Australian Government department responsible for employment.⁸ Under the SWP deed, AEs are required to appoint a 'Welfare and Wellbeing Support Person' and have a 'Welfare and Wellbeing Support Plan' in place. The support person must be located within 300 kilometres of the worker's location. 'Pacific Labour Mobility Officers' were announced as part of Australia's 2020 budget to undertake additional welfare, monitoring, compliance

and accommodation checks for the SWP (Curtain and Howes 2020:15). The department also provides a SWP information line during business hours. In March 2021, the employment department announced the Salvation Army as the 'Community Connections' provider to support connections between workers and their local communities (DFAT 2021).

The PLS has been overseen by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through the Pacific Labour Facility (PLF) which is managed by a private company, Palladium International Pty Ltd (AusTender 2022). Under the PLS, worker welfare is the responsibility of the AE with additional support provided by PLF case managers (DFAT 2021:8). The PLF provides a 24-hour phone line, known as the Support Service line, which is for workers and employers to report concerns, issues and critical incidents. The PLF Worker Welfare Team assigns case managers to worker cohorts to track their progress and assist in welfare matters (DFAT 2021:8). The Worker Welfare Team undertakes site and risk assessment for all PLS workers and community sites, a key part of which is identifying in-community support networks for PLS workers. Similar to the SWP, employers are responsible for delivering the on-arrival briefing.

As the number of workers began to grow following the pandemic, the PLF and DFAT began to consider how to transition to a less resource intensive approach to welfare. This was also likely influenced by the review of the PLF in 2020 which recommended that PLF expand the role of employers and establish strategies that will be necessary to manage the program sustainably at scale (Leon 2020). While it was announced that the PLS and SWP were merged on 4 April 2022, in reality, the two streams continued to operate separately due to the different deeds of agreement and governance structures. At the time of our study there were nuances in the worker welfare arrangements of each initiative.

The information sheet on support for workers (PALM Scheme 2023) stresses that the employer is the first avenue for support. Four other areas are mentioned: the PALM support service line which is open to calls about 'serious problems' 24 hours a day, and for less serious problems during business hours; CLOs; the Fair Work Ombudsman to call about employment conditions, rates and entitlements, with an additional number if an interpreter is required; and emergency services, which includes the emergency number but emphasises employers should be told about serious injuries and illnesses, or workers involved in a crime or experiencing domestic violence.

More detail on the various worker support mechanisms is provided below.

Approved employer support mechanisms

There is an array of organisations and companies that became approved employers under the scheme. They include a spectrum from small family-run farms to large multinational companies. Some employ Pacific Islanders directly; others are labour hire companies who supply

workers to host employers. The fact that the approved employers are responsible for worker welfare under the deed of agreement raises questions about ethics, confidentiality and power. Most employers appear to do their best to ensure worker welfare, since it is generally accepted that a happy worker is a productive worker. The situation can be difficult, however, when workers experience a safety or wellbeing issue that they believe is caused by the employer, or when they experience a personal issue that they do not feel comfortable raising with their employer.

As temporary visa holders, workers can feel trapped or without a safety net if things do not work out with the employer. As one interviewee put it:

We need to ensure that there is a lot of support around the workers, because the AEs hold all the power and privileges. (INT43, Pacific diaspora member and worker advocate, Queensland)

Another stakeholder drew attention to the kind of personal matters that workers may not feel comfortable about reporting to an employer:

If for example, you were in a domestic violence situation or if you were sexually assaulted, would your first thought be to go to your AE? I guess probably not. (INT33, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

Labour hire companies

From our interviews, we found that labour hire companies, in general, do not have as good a reputation as direct employers in terms of worker welfare. The separation between the labour hire company and the daily work and needs of the workers may create a gulf or lack of interest. In the workers' survey, the comment was made:

The contractors are taking advantage in my point of view.

Given that a large proportion of workers are engaged through labour hire companies, and one in particular, it was sobering to hear stakeholders and workers being critical of the job they did in helping and supporting workers. Much depends on the local parties that represent the labour hire company and their approach and sense of responsibility to the workers. Some stakeholders asserted that the companies were only interested in money and not in the welfare of the workers. For instance, one said:

Particularly labour hire contractors, they're just grabbing workers and they're placing them in farms. And then that means that they're sometimes pushing those welfare responsibilities to the host farm. And as approved employer, they're effectively only responsible for processing their pays and administering employment contracts. (INT23)

Another was negative about the way the labour hire companies operated, being largely office based:

When you operate as labour hire company, you might have a centralised office and you've got reporting systems and communication systems which again may or may not be easy to use, for a worker to engage in. You're then operating at arm's length, so you don't see everything and your urgency of response is probably impacted by that separation as well. I think the requirement of having pastoral care workers within 300 kilometres goes some distance to improving that. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

Some labour hire companies we spoke to seemed to be bucking the trend however, with high levels of cultural understanding and support for workers. One labour hire company told us about the multiple mechanisms in place for providing supporting to workers – including physically locating welfare officers at the host site and their own 24-hour hotline, including access to an online GP. In their experience, workers were much more likely to approach the welfare officer when they have an issue, rather than call a hotline. It was also notable that these welfare officers are located at the host site but employed by the labour hire company. This may generate a degree of independence and provide an environment in which workers feel able to share wellbeing issues that relate to their host employer.

Small employers

At the other end of the spectrum are the small AEs, who are often family businesses in the agriculture sector. During the height of the COVID-19 lockdowns in Australia, and rolling border closures in Pacific Island countries and Australia, many workers were stranded in Australia. Stories emerged of AEs, typically smaller ones, going out of their way to assist the workers and make their prolonged stay less stressful. Box 3 contains a summary of the account given by a small-scale employer of her approach to supporting a PLF worker over many years. However, it should be noted that she, along with other smaller AEs and their representatives, underlined in the RAFs and in interviews the heavy burden they carry; a burden which they often feel they do not have the resources and the capacity to adequately meet. As the employer described it, she finds it difficult to put on the 'different hats' involved in being a boss and a support person, as one who is not familiar with the 'cultural stuff'. When her first PNG worker came with his brother three years earlier, there was a PNG support worker who met him and settled him in. Two new PNG men who arrived in 2022 did not have a support person so they relied on the PNG worker who was already employed to take on that role.

Box 3: A family business

The family runs a beekeeping business which had previously relied on recruiting Filipino workers. They first engaged two Papua New Guinean workers after attending a conference and hearing about the scheme from an entomologist who had worked in PNG. The advantages for the business are that the Papua New Guineans had experience of beekeeping (but not as a commercial enterprise) and the costs of recruitment are less than workers employed via 482 (Temporary Skill Shortage) visas. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the PLF arranged for the two brothers from PNG to go interstate for six months to pick fruit, as the AE was not sure if their business could sustain them. One brother went home and the other one 'hated it and he eventually came back here'.

She described 'settling in' new workers as setting up rental accommodation (no mean feat in the current dearth of rental accommodation), providing white goods, and then when the workers are here, organising a bank account. After they have started work, she gives what she called 'boss mum lectures' on keeping the rental accommodation clean and tidy, and being prepared for rental inspections. She encourages them to tell her if they break something, rather than try to fix it themselves. She tried to encourage independence and a sense of responsibility, with them paying directly for water and electricity.

Although they may come to her in the first instance for advice on local services, such as where to find a church, she has found that social media has made it easier for them to ask fellow nationals in the nearby town. The PNG man found it very difficult when he could not go home during COVID-19 restrictions and she 'comforted him in his grief' and 'became mum' when an uncle died back home.

Welfare Officers

Earlier in this chapter it was described how, under the SWP, AEs are obliged to appoint a Welfare and Wellbeing Support Person and develop Welfare and Wellbeing Plans for workers. Under the PLS, employers have obligations relating to worker welfare without, however, the requirement to appoint a specific person. While talking to people at employment sites, both stakeholders and workers referred to 'Welfare Officers', which we understood to mean employees of AEs who are fulfilling the role of Welfare and Wellbeing Support Person, or who are assisting to meet the PLS employers' welfare obligations. The previous section on labour hire companies gave an example of where the Welfare Officer played a vital frontline role, liaising between workers and the host company. We spoke to a Welfare Officer employed by a labour hire company, who was responsible for more than 100 workers in the meat

industry in a rural area of NSW. Her dedication and approach were applauded by the host employer and other stakeholders. Box 4 summarises what she did, and how she explained her modus operandi.

The rather fraught position of the welfare officers, similar to team leaders, was underlined by some workers and stakeholders. Several workers admitted they saw their welfare officer as representing the employer's interests, and no longer had confidence that the officer would follow up on their concerns or represent their interests.

A member of the Pacific diaspora noted the importance of employers and welfare officers having an understanding of the culture of in the different countries that their workers come from:

There is a big gap in terms of cultural practices. In my opinion, employers need country-focused responses. For example, if they have Fijian workers, they need a Fijian response. Pacific countries are similar, but each country is different. Papua New Guineans are different to Tongans. (INT7, member of Pacific diaspora, Queensland)

Team leaders

In workplaces with larger numbers of workers, a 'Team Leader' is appointed from among the workers. At some RAFs, team leaders were asked to present on the experiences of workers they represented. One stakeholder said that the team leaders were not in a position to 'freely' describe or represent the workers' perspectives. It was unclear at RAFs and in subsequent conversations with several team leaders whether they receive additional pay from the AE for their team leader responsibilities. We understand there is a variety of arrangements relating to team leaders — some are appointed by the community before leaving home, some are appointed by the employer in Australia. Some are also team leaders in the workplace and receive supervisory rates of pay, while others take on a liaison role between employer and workers, sometimes involving translating, but do not receive a higher rate of pay.

A PLF staff member asserted that the 'Team Leader can be a really great help in terms of supporting and directing the workers and with language support. We see them as key'. Nevertheless, we heard quite a few stakeholders and workers express disappointment or dissatisfaction with Team Leaders. For example, a worker said:

We have a team leader. He was made team leader in Australia. He doesn't do his role. So sometimes I just go by myself to the office and ask them. I think [the] team leader doesn't raise the issue because he doesn't want to make a problem. (INT41, PALM scheme worker, meat processing industry, male, Queensland)

According to a PLF member of staff with Pacific heritage, not always the right person is appointed to the position:

Box 4: An exemplary Welfare Officer: Proactive and outreach pastoral care

In several interviews the Welfare Officer, who was of Samoan heritage and had social work qualifications, outlined both the staged process of induction and her approach to providing pastoral care. The initial phase involves picking up the workers from the airport, giving them phones and a cash advance, taking them to a shop to buy clothes and other household and personal items, setting up banking and taking them to their accommodation. She also arranges the Q fever 'scratch', which is a skin test required before getting vaccinated against Q fever (a bacterial infection spread by animals), as the workers are employed in the meat processing industry. The employer provides a venue for a two to three day induction, and when the workers start work a week later, then they receive an induction on their jobs and the workplace. Many workers are from villages and she said she has to 'educate, educate, educate', explaining pay and deductions, work routine and rental accommodation obligations, health insurance and, as they settle in, about what is allowed under Australian law related to, for example, alcohol consumption and driving. After hours, she gets called by the workers and local services when there is problem or trouble and sometimes has to play what she termed her 'bad mama' role. She says that if she 'sat in an office' she would not be able to attend to the issues that are raised, which she has said included abortion, attempted suicide and conflict. For her, networking with local bodies and services such as the police, council, churches and sports clubs, as well as building relationships with the management of the host employer, had been critical to doing her job well. She also said being from Samoa had been a 'huge help' even though the workers are from other Pacific Island countries.

In the SWP space, it's quite common for the team leader to play a prominent role. I think it definitely helps when the team leaders are identified back in the home country. Because of the chiefly system, the person selected will have some status and will be respected by the workers. I've seen instances where the AE select the team leader in Australia where it's someone with good English and a younger person. The workers find it harder to share their problem with someone who is younger and doesn't have status. (INT21, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

One stakeholder believed that having team leaders was not working because for Pacific Islanders to 'open up, you have to go into their comfort zones, go to their

church gatherings, kava session, get an informal meeting kind of set up where they are more comfortable'. Team leaders who do that the kind of engagement with workers at work and after hours, as advocated by the stakeholder, may be subject to considerable demands and require more support. A female team leader we interviewed described being 'on the job, 24 hours a day'. She had people calling in at her residence or ringing her about a wide range of matters.

Government support mechanisms

Country liaison officers

Country liaison officers (CLOs) are residents of Australia and are appointed by their home country governments. Workers are encouraged to contact them if they have any problems connected to their employment. In March 2023, seven of the 10 participating countries had CLOs with their contact details listed on the PALM website — all except Fiji, PNG and Tuvalu. Over the course of our research, we have seen the number of countries with CLOs grow. An AE commented that 'CLOs are excellent and can play a bigger role' and a PLF staff member said they had noticed less worker disengagement for countries that have CLOs in place. Other stakeholders expressed the view that the ratio of CLOs to workers is unmanageable. For example, at the time of our data collection in 2022, there was one CLO from Vanuatu and over 10,000 workers from Vanuatu in Australia. While more CLOs have been appointed recently, there remain concerns that they are mostly male and the ratios of CLOs to workers remain impracticable (one CLO for thousands of workers).

One group of workers had not found their CLO very helpful. A worker said the CLO mainly helps new arrivals, and mainly via a Facebook group conveyed 'words of encouragement' and 'preached verses from the Bible'. When a few of them had asked about practical problems or issues they said they were told that it was not the CLO's 'job' to help with such matters.

According to a stakeholder who works closely with the scheme:

One challenge, particularly for countries that don't have CLOs in place, has been the involvement of heads of diplomatic missions in worker welfare issues. This means that issues are being handled by the wrong people at the wrong level. Small issues are turning into diplomatic incidents. In some cases, we've had heads of mission trying to mediate domestic violence cases, which really should be handled by appropriately trained service providers. (INTND1, stakeholder)

Community Connections program

Federal funding of \$1 million over two years for the Community Connections program was announced in December 2020. The aim of the program, according to

a ministerial media release, was to 'provide additional welfare support to workers and connect them with their local communities to help foster closer connections between participants of the Seasonal Worker Programme and the local communities they're working in. Stronger community connections can increase worker satisfaction, reduce homesickness and boost productivity' (Cash 15/12/2020).

The Community Connections program is delivered by a consortium led by the Salvation Army and including the Uniting Church Australia Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, the Pacific Islands Council of Queensland, the Pacific Islands Council of South Australia and the NSW Council for Pacific Communities. Originally, the Community Connections program was to only support SWP participants. Since the merging of the schemes under PALM, we were told the Community Connections program's remit includes all PALM scheme workers.

The Community Connections staff have a relatively narrow role, which officially involves connecting workers and employers with community groups. Inevitably, when Community Connections staff visit workplaces and workers, they are presented with issues relating to welfare, and need to refer the worker on to ensure that they can get the support they need. We were told that staff are sometimes in difficult situations where they are asked directly for support by workers but are not funded to do that. We got the impression that a lot of support was being provided 'unofficially'.

Pacific Labour Mobility Officers

At the same time that the funding for the Community Connections program under the SWP was announced in December 2020, funding was also allocated for 19 Pacific Labour Mobility Officers (PLMOs). These positions were described in the ministerial media release as being added to the SWP 'to undertake additional welfare, monitoring, compliance and accommodation checks' (Cash 15/12/2020).

Each PLMO is allocated to a geographical area. One PLMO that we spoke to said that a typical work week involves reviewing recruitment plans and supporting welfare and wellbeing issues that crop up:

... everything from domestic violence, civil disturbances that result in police presence, right up to crimes being committed, workers being arrested, convicted, sentenced and then incarcerated.

Then there's lower-level events. So, such as excessive consumption of alcohol, consumption of illicit substances.

And then and then there's any number of common workplace disputes. The same that Australian citizens would experience with their employers.

Workers might be hospitalised for workplace

injuries that occur as part of picking and packing the crops. But then we're also notified of workers that have gone from employers as well, and that usually is the result of some dispute, and sometimes those disputes have links to welfare and wellbeing issues. (INTND2, stakeholder)

We were also told that with the alignment of SWP and PLS, the PLMO network was being scaled back as the government planned to integrate the two workforces.

Support mechanisms overseen by the Pacific Labour Facility

When the PLS began in 2018, the administering body, the PLF, played a greater role in worker welfare than had previously been provided by the federal government for the SWP. As mentioned earlier, the PLF provides a 24-hour phone line and has case managers that assist with welfare matters. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PLF was funded by DFAT to also support the SWP, and assisted with over 700 welfare cases between mid-2020 and the end of 2021 (Bailey 2022).

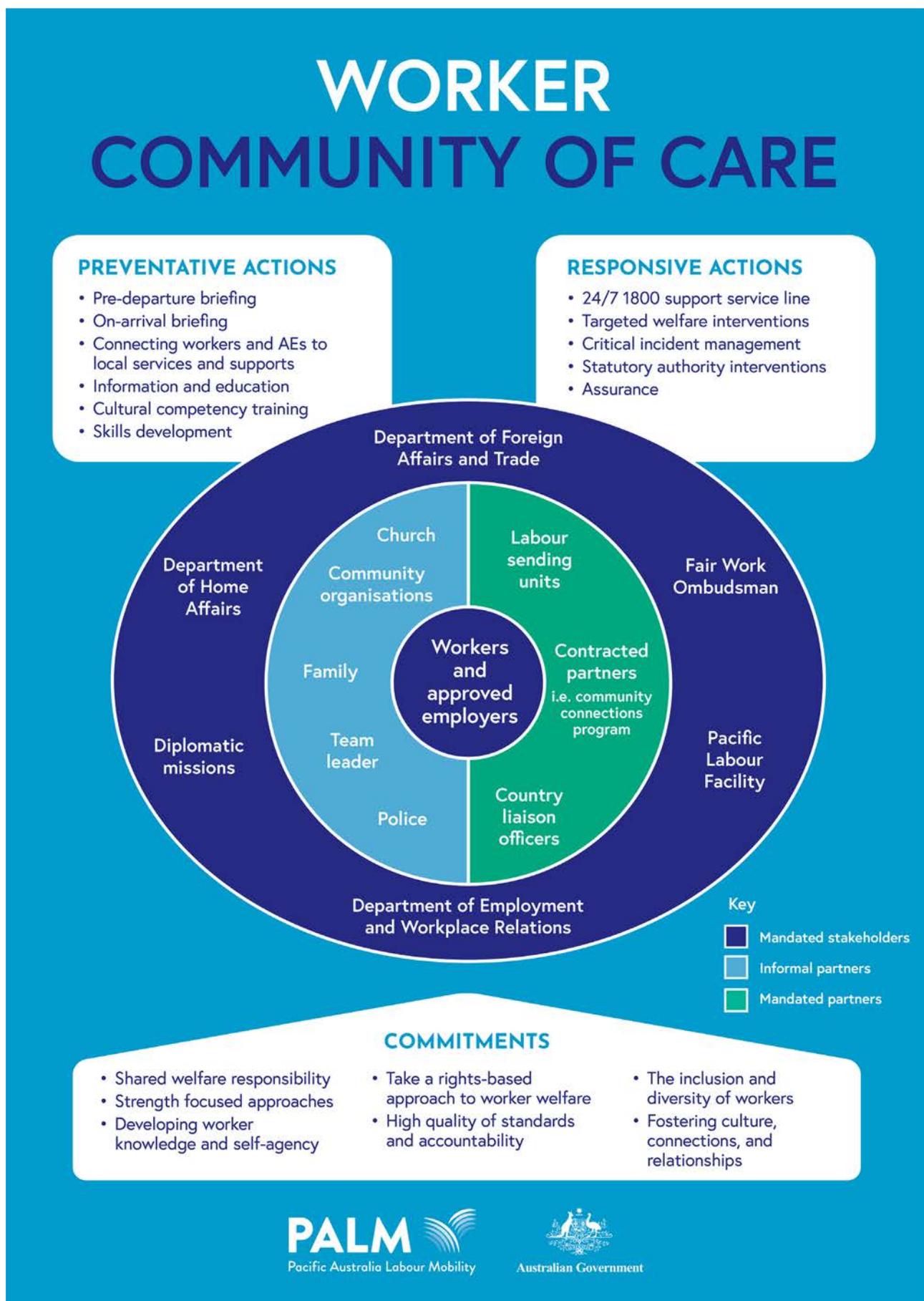
In 2021, the government announced an intention to double worker numbers by bringing an additional 12,500 people to Australia by March 2022 (Robert et al. 14/9/2021). With the number of PLS participants rapidly growing, stakeholders told us that the PLF had to consider how worker welfare could continue to be supported without expanding the resource-intensive case management approach. The PLF developed a 'community of care' model (Figure 6), where support for worker wellbeing is shared across multiple stakeholders, and it also advocates for 'self-agency' where workers are supported to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. This model was promulgated at the RAFs that we attended in 2021 and 2022 (the RAFS are discussed in more detail in a later section).

Some stakeholders voiced concerns about the Australian Government's plan to scale up the program so quickly, especially when there was a view that existing structures did not go far enough to ensure the cultural, physical and emotional safety of workers. For other stakeholders, particularly employers, a key concern was putting appropriate welfare protections in place for workers without overburdening employers so much that the program ceased to be an attractive option for recruiting staff.

Telephone Hotline

Having a free 24-hour telephone hotline was viewed as a positive initiative by the PLF. Many stakeholders noted that it is good that it exists; however, emphasising that for a lot of workers, calling a hotline and speaking about a problem with someone they do not know will rarely be their first port of call. A further complaint from some stakeholders and workers was that they did not know what had been done to follow up on their call. The critical incident data indicated that almost all cases, irrespective of how they were brought to the attention of

Figure 6: PALM scheme Worker Community of Care model



Source: Pacific Labour Facility

the PLF, had been 'resolved'. Such complaints suggest that there were not always effective and timely avenues to communicate the outcome of calls.

Regional initiative

A regional program, known as the Naracoorte Initiative, took place over six months in early 2021 after several challenges were identified affecting workers in Naracoorte, South Australia. The challenges included absenteeism, alcohol-related incidents (drink-driving offences) and mental health issues. Naracoorte is located approximately halfway between Adelaide and Melbourne and has limited transport options, or sporting, faith or cultural activities (Pacific Labour Facility 2021).

The Adelaide-based Pacific Island Council of South Australia (PICSA) was engaged as a regional partner to deliver local support to more than 80 PLS workers living and working in Naracoorte. PICSA delivered a series of monthly social activities (including sporting, cultural and spiritual) and supported connections with local communities and churches to build social cohesion and improve worker self-agency and wellbeing (Pacific Labour Facility 2021).

According to a PLF employee who was involved in the initiative, it was also designed to address home countries' opposition to workers having contact with the diaspora (as they believed they were spreading misinformation), by showing that the rewards outweighed the risks. They said that cultural and sporting events were organised, workshops were held that provided information, for example on health insurance, and local leaders from the diaspora offered support. The program was reported to have had a positive impact on worker behaviour and wellbeing, and led to further initiatives including the RAF and the Community Connections program, which PICSA facilitates in South Australia.

Regional Accelerator Forums

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Regional Accelerator Forums are an initiative by the PLF to support effective regional operating environments for the scheme. Their purpose includes to share information, clarify roles and responsibilities and establish regional networks of PALM scheme stakeholders.

The first RAF was held in 2021 in Naracoorte, South Australia, following the Naracoorte Initiative described above. During our research data collection phase, RAFs were subsequently convened by the PLF in Queensland, NSW and WA. At the fora, the PLF and other stakeholders provide information and updates on critical aspects of the PLS/PALM scheme. Representatives from employers and churches also presented on their experiences in supporting workers and the events had a Pacific flavour with talanoa sessions and Pacific language 'energiser' activities.

Attendees varied by location, although the people typically invited included employers, CLOs, diaspora representatives, local police, diplomatic staff (from participating countries), local councils and representatives from churches and community organisations who were

known to be providing support to workers in the region. In the initial RAFs, no workers were invited, but this changed as time went on. As one PLF staff member said:

Initially there were no workers and we had feedback around that. Then team leaders were invited to attend as observers. Then at subsequent RAFs team leaders were invited to speak and share their stories. And that turned into a real highlight of the next three RAFs. (INT15, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

The majority of those who had attended a RAF and were interviewed for this research project were positive about the idea of holding RAFs and adopting a regional action plan to improve support and communication. Many spoke positively about the event itself, but were more cautious in their assessment of what had happened subsequently after the event. Some felt that there had been little in the way of clear and tangible outcomes, or follow-up of the issues that were discussed.

Out of the 54 stakeholders who participated in our survey, 30 said they or a representative from their organisation had participated in a RAF. Of those 30, the majority had been to Cairns (n=10) or Caboolture (n=9). Nine had attended in NSW (Wagga Wagga (n=7) or Tamworth (n=2)), and three had been to the one in Naracoorte. In response to the question 'How much of a change do you think has come about as a result of the RAF?', half of the 28 who answered (n=14) said 'small change', eight said 'no change', and six said 'big change'. The numbers are too small to examine whether responses differed by location. However, in general, it appeared that the NSW regions were seen as more difficult environments in which to generate interest, commitment and networks among stakeholders. A Fijian community leader was of the view that NSW was 'behind' other jurisdictions, in comparison to for example SA, where there have been concerted efforts to support workers and connect them to the community.

Our observations were that great strides were also made in Queensland where, following the RAFs in Caboolture and Cairns, regional networks were established, buoyed by follow-up video meetings and a network email distribution system. These networks continued to be supported by Regional Relationship Managers, which are discussed in the next section.

Some of the comments from community stakeholders regarding the RAFs included:

Those RAFs I think were really good because it brought everyone together and it created relationships, and for me relationships compound. So if interest compounds, and so do relationships, then we need those RAFs to start the connection, to then get on the journey together.

The RAF was good because connections were made and stories were told. So you can't really go wrong with that.

There were good stories shared, but how can people access that? Where is the repository?

This was the feedback from an employer:

The RAFs were really worthwhile for us. We'd emailed PLF staff before but it was great to meet them face to face. It was also a great opportunity to meet other AEs.

Regional Relationship Managers

Recognising a need to have staff present in regional areas to assist with the smooth running of the program, in 2022 the PLF started recruiting a number of Regional Relationship Managers. According to a job advertisement, these managers are the key point of contact for all labour mobility stakeholders in regional Australia including prospective employers, approved employers, country liaison officers, community organisations, local government, industry bodies and Pacific Labour Facility (PLF) central office.

Our observations, particularly during visits to locations in north and south-east Queensland, were that these staff are playing a crucial role in supporting employers and building networks of people who have a common understanding and shared vision in terms of achieving the goals of the scheme. One stakeholder working closely with the scheme told us in an interview:

The PLF is charging ahead with the development of their regional workforce and I think it's a good move. The regional relationship managers, they do look and smell very much like PLMOs, the responsibilities are very much the same. But the advantage that PLS has over SWP at the moment is that they're far more agile and so by establishing this regional workforce they'll purposefully put departmental offices or employees of the program closer to employers who are doing the business. They'll also be able to build, I'd say, far more effective relationships with local diaspora and local community organisations who can assist the workers. (INTND3, stakeholder)

Other stakeholders have expressed concern about the planned 'in-sourcing' of roles from the PLF to DEWR in 2024 with a fear that a workforce of federal government officers will not be able to offer the same level of service or care.

Many stakeholders we spoke with were impressed by the PLF and the work of their staff in managing such a complex program. A credit to the PLF has been its emphasis on recruiting staff with Pacific heritage and Pacific work experience. Stakeholders, notably mostly in Queensland, noted that these staff with good knowledge of both Australian and Pacific systems and cultures help to bridge cultural understanding gaps between employers and workers.

Of the workers we spoke to, most had not had much direct contact with the PLF (which is not surprising given the program structure), but there was a sense that it could be useful to have more interactions between workers and program officials. One worker said in the survey:

PLF/PALM need to do more meeting with workers, addressing issues and questions.

Other forms of support

Unions

Although workers and stakeholders in interviews infrequently referred to unions, several representatives from the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU), which is the union for workers in the meat processing industry, said that much had been done with PLS/PALM workers in abattoirs where there was an active local official and the workforce had high membership. In the union's Queensland branch magazine, there are articles written by local officials that refer to rates of pay for PALM workers, and a case where the organiser had ensured the workers received back pay when they were being paid at a lower rate of pay. In another article, the organiser describes what is called a PALM donation day of friendly matches and community barbecues, organised by the AMIEU and a local football club, to raise donations for PALM workers who had recently arrived, but who were struggling as the meatworks were shut down for annual leave (AMIEU Queensland 2023).

The AMIEU's submission to the Review of the Migration System places any current poor practices in the industry within the context of an increasing number of temporary migrant labourers being employed (AMIEU Federal Office 2022). Since 2004, the industry is described as having engaged workers initially through the subclass 457 visa program, to ensure what it is argued as 'wage suppression' and on the basis of what was called a 'skills shortage' (AMIEU Federal Office 2022). It seems that the union has been seeking to address at a system or government level the opportunities for exploitation by labour hire companies and other employers. In the submission it argues that Pacific Island workers 'have been, in most establishments, receiving lower wages than Australian workers, performing the same or similar work' (AMIEU Federal Office 2022:7).

From the workers' point of view, they may not be aware of a union's existence, nor be aware of the lobbying being done at national policy or program level. As one stakeholder put it, the employer may be hostile to unions and the workers themselves may have had no prior experience of unions in their home countries. It is only when there is an active union presence, as described by local organisers for the Queensland branch of the AMIEU, that the workers are likely to see tangible benefits of union membership and support.

Diaspora

The diaspora is a source of support for workers and can be very influential, both in positive and negative ways. Research participants told us that members of the Pacific diaspora sometime do not have adequate information about the scheme and hence do not always provide the best advice to workers. At the extreme end of the spectrum, this can influence decisions that put the workers in breach of program rules and visa conditions, such as disengagement.

Formal diaspora groups are playing an important role in supporting workers, especially when issues arise. This includes those formally engaged through the Community Connections program, as well as a plethora of other organisations. They are able to bridge some of the cultural and knowledge gaps, for example, many of the workers do not have experience working in the formal sector so systems such as pay slips, contracts and leave take some time to learn. We were told that many issues arise due to misunderstandings, and can be resolved when people are brought together to discuss them.

In addition to formal diaspora groups, individuals are also providing a lot of support from their own pockets. According to key stakeholders, a lot of in-kind support was being provided by the diaspora for example, paying for groceries, delivering blankets, and dinner invitations. Although not quantified anywhere, such assistance can be of huge value economically and in terms of wellbeing. One member of the Pacific diaspora who works at a hospital told us how she was called to assist often when someone from her country of heritage was admitted to the hospital. Usually, the call was from another member of the community, asking her to check on the patient, as they know she is familiar with the hospital system.

A common theme across discussions with diaspora groups in different locations was the limited resources they have, and how it was individual people who were bearing the costs for supporting workers. A cautionary note was sounded by a PLF staff member who made the following observations:

The program awareness for the diaspora communities in conditions by leaving the program and taking up work with a different employer. They also tell workers that they are on a path to permanent residency, which isn't the case. They're well meaning, but just don't have the correct information. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

Spiritual wellbeing

As time has gone by and the scheme has matured, employers have increasingly recognised that wellbeing for Pacific people is closely linked to culture and spirituality. Some make arrangements to provide transport to and links with local churches, or to arrange for local religious leaders to visit farms and run religious services.

Box 5: Examples of supportive local service providers or voluntary organisations

In the course of our research, we encountered examples of local service providers or voluntary organisations that were playing a crucial role in assisting Pacific workers to access resources and to be aware of the local context, including services and aspects of the law. For example:

In a NSW regional centre an employee with a large NGO was acting as an advocate for workers in the meat industry, as well as offering practical assistance. As an advocate and through community engagement, concerns have been raised with the PLF, Community Connections, the local member and others about living and work conditions of the workers in the industry.

In a SA rural town, a multicultural NGO that originally worked with refugees and humanitarian groups has expanded to work with 'everyone who is new', which includes PALM workers. The service provides information to the workers, liaises with host employers, and calls on service clubs and volunteers to assist with community events and to address issues such as accommodation and access to health care.

In a NSW rural town the multicultural support group has similarly expanded its role to include 'refugees, migrants and new settlers'. Workers from Pacific Island countries first arrived in the area to work as fruit pickers and, more recently, increased numbers have arrived to work in the meat industry. The group is led by a volunteer — a former mayor — and there is also a funded position. Initiatives include networking with host employers and the local AE pastoral care worker and organising welcome events and information sessions, including talks by local service providers, for example by a local police officer.

At one site that we visited, horticulture workers spoke about getting together every Sunday for a service. They lived at a remote location with no access to churches so they ran their own fellowship, taking turns in leading the service. Workers spoke of this as very important for their mental health: an opportunity to come together, refresh the mind through quiet contemplation, draw on each other, give thanks and pray for strength for the coming week of work.

The Anglican Church recognises the needs of the PALM scheme workers in North Queensland and has recruited pastors from the Pacific. At the time of our study, a Melanesian pastor in far north Queensland was playing an important role for PALM scheme workers in the area. He has provided pastoral care in general, and after specific incidents such as car accidents and health

problems. He has also performed cultural and spiritual functions that are important to the workers, such as a ‘clearance’ ceremony to cleanse the areas of malevolent forces after a worker committed suicide.

In a number of locations in NSW, in a regional centre and an outlying rural town, there are a range of established churches that workers could attend. There was no direct involvement by AEs or host employers with transport or visits by religious leaders to workplaces. It was up to the workers to make their own arrangements, and many did organise their attendance at services in towns. In addition, workers indicated there was usually a fellow worker, who acted as a pastor and provided pastoral care, who played a critical role in giving advice and solace.

Local community organisations or advocates

Through our visits to various locations and our interviews with stakeholders and workers it became apparent that in regional centre or small-town settings there may be only one agency or a key individual who was taking the lead and committed to assisting Pacific workers. Having such support and advocacy can be crucial in rural and regional settings where there are few if any residents who are part of the Pacific diaspora. Examples of such community organisations are provided in Box 5. Local churches were also mentioned as donating items of furniture and clothing.

Labour scheme cohort and local connections

From focus groups and interviews with workers it was very clear that many sought information and advice from fellow workers who came from the same country and arrived in Australia at the same time as them – what might be termed their arrival cohort. These friends often share accommodation and are employed in the same workplaces. Within, and providing a link across, such groupings an informal religious leader can play a central role in providing pastoral care and advice.

In the course of discussions, looser connections were referred to, whereby workers joined social media groups of people who came from the same country, which were accessed to elicit advice or information on a range of issues. Similarly, if through social media it became apparent that there were people from the same country of origin residing in the closest or nearby town, a virtual connection was used to make contact and sometimes meetings ensued. However, face to face contact is constrained by long working hours and challenges such as finding transport.

Barriers to accessing support

The survey of workers asked them which people or organisation they would turn to if they had a problem. As Table 13 shows, almost one-third chose their employer, with only a slightly smaller number choosing a team leader (27.3%).

The PLF welfare data indicate that workplace issues were the most common matter raised through their helpline or with staff (see Table 8), and the results of the workers’ survey suggests it is the employer and the team leader that they first turn to if they have a problem, which makes sense if it is related to their work. However, according to a PLF staff member, workers were likely to approach someone they knew and spoke their own language before raising a matter with an AE:

When a worker has a problem, they will go to a trusted person. When someone is engaged through a big labour hire company, often there isn’t a trusted person from the company that they would go to. They might go to someone they know better at the host site, but I think it’s quite common to go to someone that can speak their mother tongue. So generally it’s other community members, family members or

Table 13: Ranking of people or organisation that workers say they turn to if s/he has a problem

	Number	Percentage	Ranking
Employer	96	32.0	1
Team leader	82	27.3	2
Pacific Labour Facility/PALM support phone line	54	18.0	3
Friends or family in home country	31	10.3	4
Pacific friends or family in Australia	15	5.0	5
Australian friends	7	2.3	6
Church pastor/minister/priest	6	2.0	7
Other	9	3.0	N/A
TOTAL	300	99.9	

Source: Workers’ survey (n=303)

a country liaison officer. It's not uncommon for workers to approach someone like that before they approach their AE directly. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

The workers' survey found no significant differences in who workers would go to for help if they had a problem with safety. However, from interviews and consultations, there were certain personal matters that workers would be reluctant to raise with employers, and as the previous chapter discussed, workers' experiences and perceptions differed by gender. A worker, engaged under the SWP, gave the example of when a co-worker suspected she might be pregnant. The co-worker called a cleaner at the local hospital who was of the same nationality as she knew the cleaner had some understanding of the health system. The co-worker was able to arrange a pregnancy test with support from the cleaner. The SWP worker said that 'most workers don't know where to go for help. They don't know what services are available. They are embarrassed that they can't explain their problem in English and they feel shy.'

In the surveys of both workers and of stakeholders, respondents were asked to indicate which of the listed factors acted as a barrier to workers accessing support. Respondents were asked to tick all that applied. Slightly different options were provided for

stakeholders and for the workers. As Table 14 shows, the most common factor nominated by stakeholders was that workers are 'shy or embarrassed to seek support' (75.5% of respondents) closely followed by language and cultural barriers (69.8% and 67.9% respectively). Approximately half of the stakeholder respondents said that the 'lack of information', and 'lack of services in regional areas' and 'services that were culturally appropriate' acted as barriers.

More than half the workers who answered the question said that being 'worried about losing job or visa' (56.4%) and being 'shy or embarrassed to ask for help' (53.6%) acted as barriers. Less so were the other four listed factors – 'not confident speaking English' (41.9%), 'not sure where to go' (36.1%), 'services don't understand Pacific culture' (26.8%) and 'hard to get transport' (22.3%) (see Table 15).

In interviews and focus groups, participant workers did often refer to being afraid of losing their jobs (or other negative impacts on employment or visa status). It was common for the workers not to be aware of what would be the consequences of making a complaint, especially to an employer. In some instances, workers said they had been threatened with dismissal and deportation, most notably when they had walked off a job in protest about conditions. In the workers' survey,

Table 14: Barriers to workers accessing support: stakeholder perspectives, number and percentage

	Number	Percentage
Workers are shy or embarrassed to seek support	40	75.5
Language barriers	37	69.8
Cultural barriers	36	67.9
Lack of services in regional areas	27	50.9
Lack of culturally appropriate services	26	49.1
Lack of information	25	47.2

Note: Respondents could tick as many categories as they believed applied

Source: Stakeholders' survey (n=54)

Table 15: Barriers to workers accessing support: worker perspectives, number and percentage

	Number	Percentage
Worried about losing job or visa	164	56.4
Shy or embarrassed to ask for help	156	53.6
Not confident speaking English	122	41.9
Not sure where to go	105	36.1
Services don't understand Pacific culture	78	26.8
Hard to get transport	65	22.34

Note: Respondents could tick as many categories as they believed applied

Source: Workers' survey (n=303)

several comments referred to the fear of repercussions if they talked openly about problems:

Workers aren't so confident in talking about issues they go through with professionals but rather comfortable amongst their own friends and family

... I don't know if I can trust this survey [sic]? What's the outcome and the purpose? Or if we get fired if we raise the truth and be send back to our home country.

Almost 70% of stakeholders and around 40% of workers in our surveys said that language is a barrier to accessing support. English is not necessarily a language that workers are confident speaking in, or understanding when written, particularly if the English used is technical or formal instructions. Levels of English comprehension can relate to a person's country and place of origin, and educational experience. Not all PALM scheme workers need a translator or interpreter; however, if a service provider wants to access a translator, this can be difficult. We spoke to a service provider who uses the Department of Home Affairs Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) through their state health department. They said it is difficult to get Bislama translators when they have clients from Vanuatu and sometimes also Samoa. We were told that there are only two Bislama translators (albeit non-accredited) and one Samoan interpreter available through the service.

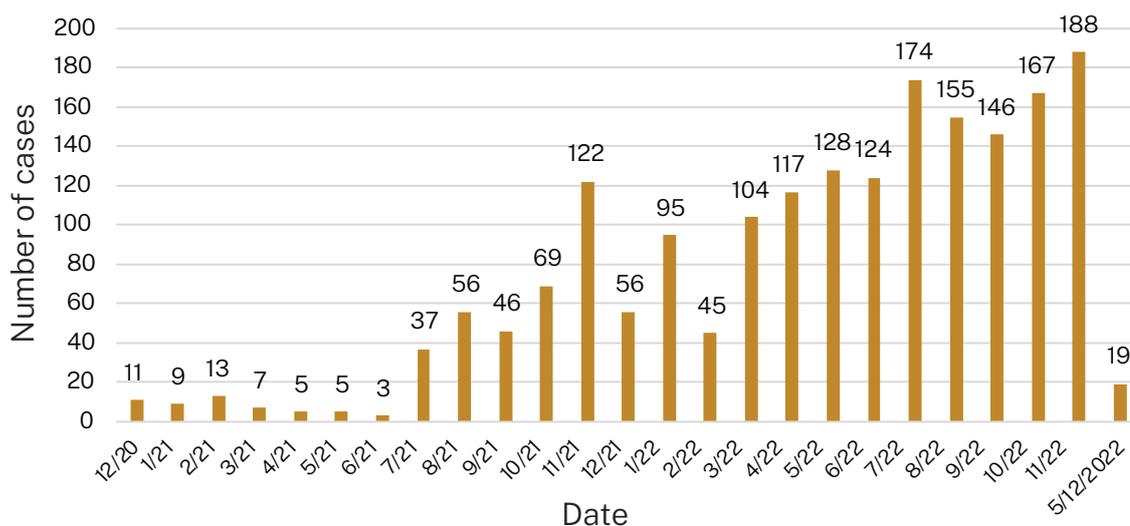
Regional, remote and local contexts

One remote location that we visited in north Queensland, where over 100 workers were stationed, did not have basic services such as mobile phone coverage at the accommodation or workplace. This is a safety issue in terms of being able to contact 000 or someone else in case of emergency. It is also a wellbeing issue if workers are not able to contact friends and family while they are at home. The main accommodation provider did have some patchy mobile access, but only with one carrier and in one location of the premises, that is, not from every room or caravan.

A union delegate representing the health care work force told us they thought that it is irresponsible of the government to allow vulnerable people to be stationed in remote areas of the Cape York Peninsula without access to adequate health services, and that relying on private health insurance is not a reasonable model.

The PLF recorded critical incidents for the two-year period (2 December 2020 to 5 December 2022) for NSW, Queensland and South Australia that show that the incidents reported to them increased over time and as more workers arrived in Australia (see Figure 7). The data also reveal that there were clusters of more cases in certain locations — Table 16 shows how four locations accounted for more than one-third (38.3%) of the recorded incidents.

Figure 7: Number of critical incidents cases recorded by the PLF by month, NSW, Qld and SA, 2 December 2020 to 5 December 2022



N= 1901

Source: PLF critical incident data

Table 16: The number of cases and locations of reported critical incidents, NSW, Qld and SA, 2 December 2020 to 5 December 2022

Number of locations	Number of incidents
4	100 to 232
9	40 to 99
10	20 to 39
12	10 to 19
49	1 to 9

N= 1899 (+ 2 blank for location)

Source: PLF critical incident data

These data give rise to the question of whether the concentration of recorded PLF incidents in specific locations are a result of the number of workers in these places, the type of industry that the workers are employed in or the practices of the AE or host sites, or other factors. As a result, we examined a region in more depth.

The case study concerns the meat industry in the NSW Riverina region. Using PLF recorded critical incidents, attendance at the Wagga Wagga RAF and visits to several towns in the region during which interviews were conducted with stakeholders and workers, a picture emerged that is summarised below.

Regional case study – NSW meat processing industry

Given the proportion of workers under the PLS that had been recruited into the meat industry since 2020, it makes sense to examine in more depth the safety and wellbeing of Pacific Island workers working in abattoirs. The PLF statistics on critical incidents also show that the hot spots of recorded cases are in NSW, and in places where most of the workers would be employed in the meat processing sector.

The case study section is divided into three parts: the first gives a brief overview of the meat processing industry; the second analyses the PLF statistics on recorded critical incidents; and the third part draws on interviews and group discussions held with stakeholders and workers in NSW.

The meat processing industry workforce in Australia

From 1996, with the introduction of temporary work visas both primary and secondary⁹ visa holders were being recruited in large numbers to work in the meat processing industry in Australia. With the advent of COVID-19 and ensuing restrictions and border closures, the meat industry, like other sectors, was adversely affected, and struggled to find workers. This was not least because of a huge decrease in the number of people coming into Australia on temporary skilled work visas. As a result, there has been a rapid rise in the number and proportion of Pacific workers in the meat processing industry in

Australia in the past few years. Between 2020 and 2022 the number of Pacific workers in Australia rose from an estimated 8000 in February 2020 to 31,500 in October 2022. One-third of the total in October 2022 were long-term workers under the Pacific Labour Scheme, with more than two-thirds of the long-term visa holders in meat processing (Jeffress et al. 2022).

Nationally, the number of direct and indirect jobs in the red meat and livestock industry is estimated to be 195,800. The processing sector was estimated to account for 30,900 jobs across Australia in 2019–20 (MLA 2021:13). In 2020–21, the average number of employees in Australia per meat processing establishment was estimated to be 40.4 employees (IBISWorld 2023). These estimates would suggest that PLS/PALM workers are primarily being placed in the largest abattoirs in NSW, with workforces of at least several hundred people.

The rates of pay in meat processing start from a low minimum amount. The Meat Industry Award was updated on 1 July 2022. In the award, rates of pay vary depending on age of the worker, as well as loadings for shift work and weekends. There are seven levels of pay for meat processing, with Level 1 being \$21.38 an hour for full-time and part-time workers, and \$26.73 for casual workers in meat processing establishments. Different pay rates are applicable for cleaners, shift workers and for afternoon and night shifts (Fair Work Ombudsman 2022).

PLF critical incidents in NSW

Two tranches of PLF critical incident statistics were provided to us, one for the period 2 December 2020 to 2 March 2022 and the second for the period 2 March 2022 to 5 December 2022. As the data were collated somewhat differently for the two periods, the summary of these data and what they tell us is presented under the two different time periods.

First period, NSW 2 December 2020 to 2 March 2022

NSW hot spots

The total number of workers in NSW, Queensland and SA under the PLS during this period is recorded as 2043. The PLF statistics on critical incidents reported for the same period – 2 December 2020 to 2 March 2022 – in those states indicated there were ‘hot spots’ where cases had been reported. In total, there were 80 locations listed for a total of 1899 critical incidents (two were blank) recorded by the PLF for the two-year period. Of these 80 locations, four locations had more than 100 cases recorded. These four locations had a total of 728 cases, which is 38.3% of the total number of cases. Three out of four of these locations are in NSW.

For the first period, from 2 December 2020 to 2 March 2022 (15 months), there was a total of 692 workers placed in NSW. Four host employers, all abattoirs in NSW, were listed as having a total of 645 PLF workers (which

Table 17: Four host employers with the largest number of PLS workers, by gender and country of origin of workers, 2 December 2020 to 2 March 2022

Host company	Total number of PLF workers	Male workers	Female workers	Fiji	Samoa	Solomon Islands	Tonga	Vanuatu	Tuvalu
Meat works A	307	228	79	125	98	26	58	0	0
Meat works B	148	148	0	78	45	17	8	0	0
Meat works C	108	89	19	61	5	14	18	6	4
Meat works D	82	82	0	25	21	32	0	4	0
Totals	645	547	98	289	169	89	84	10	4

Source: PLF critical incident data

is 93.2% of those placed in NSW during the period) (see Table 17). Of the 645 workers, 84.8% were male and 44.8% came from Fiji, 26.2% from Samoa, 13.8% from Solomon Islands and 13.0% from Tonga. A small number came from either Vanuatu (n=10) or Tuvalu (n=4).

During fieldwork, we found that the abattoirs in the Riverina region engaged two labour hire companies. One of these was the largest AE for NSW, Queensland and South Australia, employing a total of 1206 adults (which is 59.0% of all the workers recruited under the PLS during this first period). Of the 1206 adults, almost all of the workers were men, with 14.3% of the total employed by the labour hire company being women, and the majority were from Solomon Islands (32.2%), Fiji (23.0%) and Samoa (21.4%). The other labour hire company was recorded as employing 56 males, and 50 of them were from Solomon Islands.

For the same period, for Queensland, South Australia and NSW, there were a total of 581 critical incidents recorded. The locations of the three places with the most cases were in NSW with the highest ratio of cases

to workers being Location A¹⁰ followed by the other two. All three locations had large abattoirs recruited by the dominant labour hire company. Table 18 shows the types of critical incidents recorded for each of the locations. Consistently, across the three locations, 'end of employment' made up about half of the cases. For many cases, end of employment occurred when the worker disengaged.

Second period, NSW 2 March 2022 to 5 December 2022

During the nine-month period in 2022, 3814 workers were recorded as assigned to three host employers in SA (all in meat processing), seven in NSW (all in animal-related employment), and 82 in Queensland, many employing less than 10 workers and in the agricultural sector. The host employers with large number of workers in Queensland were mainly through the dominant labour hire company and involved in meat processing.

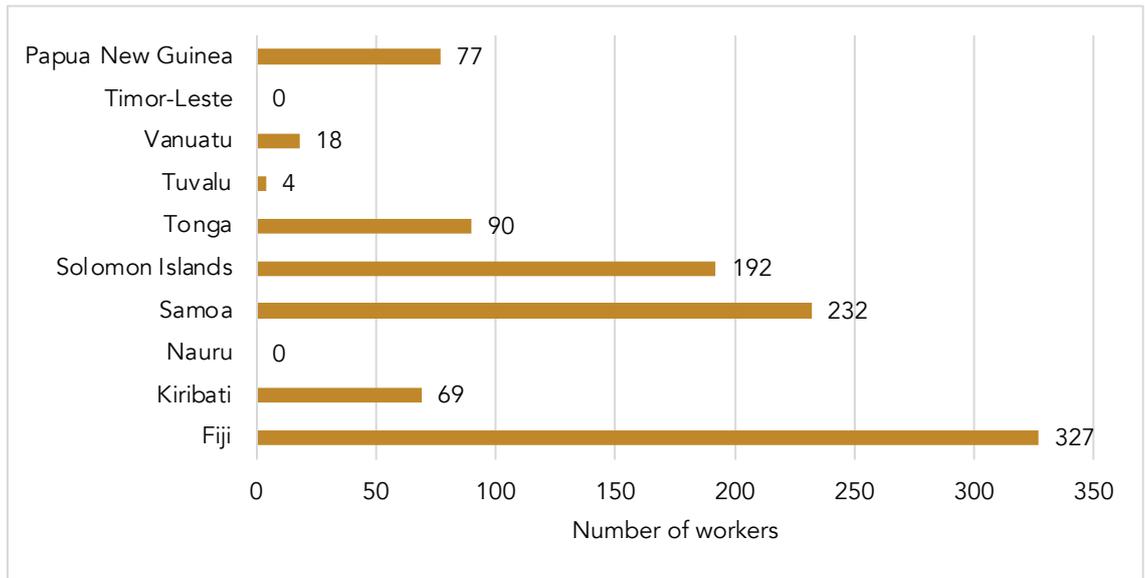
Table 18: Hot spots for critical incidents, NSW, number of cases and percentage by type of case

	Location A	Location C	Location B	Total	Percentage
End of employment	50	40	39	129	48.5
Workplace injury	20	10	6	36	13.5
Physical health	13	8	8	29	10.9
(Negative) conduct	8	9	4	21	7.9
Change of hours	8	0	1	9	3.4
Police engagement	4	0	1	5	1.9
Other*	11	13*	13	37	13.9
Total	114	80	72	266	100.0

* 'Other' includes the following categories: rights and responsibilities, mental health, diaspora, family and significant others, house and facilities. In the 'other' category for Location C there were 5 cases of 'wages/ deductions'

Source: PLF critical incident data

Figure 8: PLS workers' country of origin in NSW, 2 March 2022 to 5 December 2022



Source: PLF data

For the second period of PLF statistics on critical incidents in NSW, from 2 March 2022 to 5 December 2022, there were 1009 workers recorded, and a total of 1320 critical incidents reported. For NSW, during this nine-month period, the majority of workers were from Fiji (32.4%), followed by Samoa (23.0%), Solomon Islands (19.0%), Tonga (9.0%) and PNG (7.6%) (see Figure 8). Table 19 presents the number of workers placed in six abattoirs and a leather processing site in NSW, during the second period of nine months. The largest number of workers were placed by the dominant labour hire company, and women workers were very much in the minority. In the three meatworks with the highest number of workers, Fiji was the most common country of origin.

Hot spots of critical incidents

Of the AEs, the dominant labour hire company employed by far the most workers during this period – 91.6% of all workers. A minority of the workers employed by the labour hire company, 17.6%, were women. The dominant labour hire company placed the workers with four meat processing companies, of which three hosted the majority of workers:¹¹ Meatworks A had 433 (46.0%), Meatworks C had 209 (22.2%), and Meatworks B had 182 (19.3%). While female workers were placed with Meatworks A and C, none were placed with Meatworks B.

Out of the 1320 critical incidents recorded by the PLF for South Australia, NSW and Queensland during the nine months of 2022, 161 (12.2%) were recorded for Meatworks B. They were primarily categorised as ‘end of employment’ (112 of 161 cases, 69.6%), ‘reassignment’ or ‘redeployment’ (41 of 161 cases, 25.5%). During the same period, Meatworks C had 56 cases recorded and Meatworks A only 14 cases (see Table 20). Although the most common category was ‘end of employment’ for

both these sites, there was a greater array of categories recorded for the cases for Meatworks C.

In regard to ratio of recorded critical incidents to workers, they were as follows: Meatworks B 0.88, Meatworks C 0.27, and Meatworks A 0.03. This means that Meatworks B had a much higher rate of recorded cases than Meatworks C, and that Meatworks A has a very low rate in comparison to other two and the size of their Pacific Islander workforce.

In summary, what the two tranches of PLF data show is that:

- The number of workers who are engaged in different sites and their countries of origin are important, as these affect the likelihood of a supportive local cohort from a country of origin, and a more visible presence in the workplace and the community. Overall, there were a large number of Fijians and Samoans across the sites, but in some abattoirs there were several small groups of workers from Pacific Island countries, for example four from Tuvalu in Meatworks C.
- The industry is a male dominated workforce, and the majority of PALM workers engaged in meatworks are men, and in one, Meatworks B, no female PALM workers were employed there.
- The PLF is primarily notified about matters that relate to employment.
- ‘End of employment’ was the category with the largest number of critical incidents, which appears to indicate relatively high rates of disengagement.
- While there are ‘hot spots’ with concentrated numbers of both workers and critical incidents, the data also show that particular sites, such as Meatworks B, generate a disproportionately high number of incidents.

Table 19: AE and host employers by number of workers, gender and country of origin, NSW, 2 March 2022 to 5 December 2022

AE	Host	Gender	Country of origin
Dominant labour hire company	Meatworks A	335m 98f	Fiji 149 (20f)
			Kiribati 34 (10f)
			Samoa 113 (37f)
			SI 60 (5f)
			Tonga 45 (26f)
			Tuvalu 0
			Vanuatu 0
			PNG 32 (0f)
			Dominant labour hire company
Kiribati 35 (10f)			
Samoa 33 (12f)			
SI 30 (5f)			
Tonga 26 (10f)			
Tuvalu 4			
Vanuatu 8			
PNG 0			
Dominant labour hire company	Meatworks B	182m 0f	Fiji 56
			Kiribati 0
			Samoa 55
			SI 34
			Tonga 4
			Tuvalu 0
			Vanuatu 0
			PNG 33
Dominant labour hire company	Meatworks E	54m 16f	Fiji 8
			Kiribati 0
			Samoa 11
			SI 25 (10f)
			Tonga 14 (6f)
			Tuvalu 0
			Vanuatu 0
			PNG 12
Labour hire company	Leather processors	18m 0f	Fiji 0
			Kiribati 0
			Samoa 0
			SI 18
			Tonga 0
			Tuvalu 0
			Vanuatu 0
			PNG 0

Table 19: (cont.)

AE	Host	Gender	Country of origin
Labour hire company	Leather processors	18m 0f	Fiji 0
			Kiribati 0
			Samoa 0
			SI 18
			Tonga 0
			Tuvalu 0
			Vanuatu 0
			PNG 0
			PNG 0
Meatworks D	Meatworks D	29m 0f	Fiji 8
			Kiribati 0
			Samoa 3
			SI 18
			Tonga 0
			Tuvalu 0
			Vanuatu 0
			PNG 0
			PNG 0
Meatworks F	Meatworks F	1m 0f	Fiji 0
			Kiribati 0
			Samoa 1
			SI 0
			Tonga 0
			Tuvalu 0
			Vanuatu 0
			PNG 0
			PNG 0
TOTAL		779m 163f = 942	

Note: m = men; f = women; SI = Solomon Islands; PNG = Papua New Guinea

Source: PLF data

- There appear to be differences by location in how cases are categorised, which raises questions about how well the data are capturing the range of issues being reported to the PLF.

Qualitative data

What the interviews and focus groups revealed was a more complex picture. Many matters are not brought to the attention of the PLF, as people may not know of the hotline or may feel that nothing is done when a matter is reported. The latter feeling seemed common among workers interviewed in the Riverina region. There was also fear of repercussions from the AE or host employer if it was known that a complaint had been made. Inhibitions were apparent in relation to more personal matters, such as pregnancy or mental health concerns. As the previous chapter detailed, there are a host of concerns and problems that workers feel ill-equipped to

deal with, and uncertain as to how or where assistance can be accessed. Here, the focus is on matters that were raised during interviews in the NSW Riverina region that related to work in the meat processing industry, and life in regional NSW.

A major issue at the time of the visits was the 'stand down' period in the abattoirs.¹² One abattoir had a feed lot and did not have this issue, but the others had placed workers on reduced days for reputedly more than a month. In some instances, the workers said they had been told they could use their annual leave to meet the shortfall in income, but this was seen as unfair and unattractive to those who were longing for paid leave to travel back home. Under their agreements, workers were told they could not take a second part-time or casual job. Given the ongoing nature of their expenses, especially the rent and utilities as well as the pressure to provide a steady flow of remittances to support family and relatives back home,

Table 20: Critical incidents reported to PLF, three large meatworks, NSW, 2 March 2022 to 5 December 2022

	Meatworks B	Meatworks C	Meatworks A
End of employment	112	17	8
Redeployment/reassignment	41	11	1
Wages and deductions	0	8	0
Reassignment	0	0	0
Physical health	0	4	0
Mental health	2	2	0
Change of work hours/stand down	2	2	0
Upskilling and promotion	0	2	0
Workplace injury	0	3	2
Pregnancy	0	2	0
Negative conduct	0	1	0
Rights and responsibilities	0	2	2
Diaspora	0	1	0
Family and significant relationships	0	1	0
Termination	0	0	1
Other	2	0	0
TOTAL	161	56	14

Source: PLF data

the workers were finding it extremely hard to cope, and several interviewees said a large number of people had disengaged during the same period the previous year, because of the ‘stand down’.

Workers said they had not known what to expect at the meatworks, an issue raised at an RAF forum.¹³ Certainly, almost everyone who worked in the meatworks said they had not been prepared for the cold and work conditions, such as the assembly line model of production. Several Fijian workers who were interviewed said they did have experience in butchering, but it was different to the industrial scale of the large meatworks in Australia.

The pressure of the volume and unrelenting nature of the work was raised by many workers, with one describing it as ‘working like machines’. One abattoir was seen as especially challenging with an experienced PLS worker saying they had to kill 5000 animals a day. As workplaces, the workers referred to how there was very little time for leisure, and they were too exhausted to do much outside of work. The anti-social conditions were exacerbated for many, because they work shifts that started very early in the day. Having a job on ‘the kill floor’ or ‘the boning room’ was described as physically demanding – physical fitness was tested at one abattoir before being placed on the kill floor or boning room, and it could be risky with reports of injuries. However, at one abattoir, the workers said they were just given ‘band aids’ and sent back to work.

Another characteristic of the abattoirs was the large multicultural workforces, with many employees from Asia, although the workers who were interviewed said the Pacific workers now comprised the majority (from the 1990s onwards, people on primary and secondary temporary work visas increasingly filled labour shortages in rural and remote Australia, including the meat processing industry; see Piller and Lising 2014). Various estimates were given by different Pacific workers, ranging from 50% to 70% of the workforce in the abattoir being non-Australian and non-locals. One stakeholder estimated the turnover in the workforce to be at about 60% a year. The overseas workers were for the most part seen as polite, with the local workers being singled out as most likely to use language that the workers from Pacific Island countries found rude and abusive.

Workers who were interviewed said the first cohorts who came to Australia from 2019 to work in the meat processing industry had the biggest challenges, including having to experience COVID-19 quarantine for a fortnight upon arrival and having to deal with the more extreme forms of rude abusive and racist language from fellow workers. Participants in the worker focus groups agreed that the situation had improved since then and that they were treated with more respect.

Workers showed a deep sense of grievance where they asserted there was a lack of parity in pay with non-Pacific workers doing the same job, which seemed to be the case in a number of the meatworks. Not getting pay rises as workers became more experienced at the job –

Box 6: Examples of supportive employers in the meat processing industry

Example 1: A NSW tannery

A Fijian worker interviewed at this tannery just outside of a small town described it as ‘perfect’ and another said it was a ‘good place to start’. What made it a good workplace according to the workers, included the scheme workers being all related and from Fiji; getting the same wages as the workers from New Zealand and Australia; the company organising transport, vaccines, accommodation in the town and extra insurance cover for dental care; having a Fijian pastor among the workers who acted as a counsellor and organised events and services; the rent and utilities being reasonable; and having the opportunity to play sport and visit nearby regional centres. The HR person for the company said that everyone was ‘very friendly’, and that workers in the agricultural sector had expressed interest in being employed in the tannery because of its ‘positive’ reputation.

Example 2: A meatworks and feedlot in NSW

At the time of our fieldwork, just under a quarter of the employees in this abattoir were PLS workers, half of whom were employed on the ‘kill floor’. According to the HR manager, the first cohort of PLS workers arrived mid-2011. Since then, the workers have come predominantly from Solomon Islands, from the same region, and many are related. The HR manager said they were ‘trying to keep a community here’ and the workers are teamed up with ‘a buddy’ to ensure on the job training. The manager had heard that 20% of workers, on average, disengage from abattoirs but said they had only four disengage and a few terminated for workplace incidents (theft, violence). The low rate of disengagement was attributed to having ‘a good person as the labour hire company local person’; taking injured workers to hospital; having an investigation if a disciplinary matter arose; the company’s general manager taking a personal interest and attending events; having a very multicultural and ‘pretty tolerant workforce with 24 nationalities among the employees’; and not having ‘down periods’ as the abattoir has a feedlot.

for instance, in the boning room — was also flagged as a problem in several sites. In one workplace, a walk off by the workers had resulted in the general manager of the host employer taking a direct interest which had led to improvements. According to several Fijian interviewees, employers are not used to confident and assertive workers like them, who have skills and a history with

unions back home, unlike the workers recruited into the agricultural sector.

Unflattering comments were made about the AE ‘office staff’ at the workplace who were alleged to have ‘fobbed’ the workers off by saying they were ‘looking into’ a complaint. In one site it was claimed there was a ratio of one AE local representative to 500 workers. Nevertheless, not all stories about the AEs and host employers were negative, and Box 6 gives some examples of supportive employers.

Women in the sector were more likely to be employed in packing and cleaning, which was at least viewed as having the opportunity to do overtime. The women interviewed said they felt safe at work, and accounts of their lives outside of work were not dissimilar to the men — that is, shopping, sport and going to church. However, a certain and greater degree of caution was hinted at, in terms of where and when they might go out at night. It should be noted that because of the preponderance of men, some accommodation arrangements did not sound ideal for recently recruited women from overseas — for example, in one location, a recent group of men from the Pacific were placed in shared accommodation with Korean and Japanese women.

Women from certain Pacific countries said they found it easy to mingle with women from other Pacific countries, but some women, for example from Solomon Islands, were described as ‘shy’ and less likely to socialise. A male team leader from Tonga said they ‘looked after’ their women.

A major host employer allegedly stopped recruiting women under the scheme in 2020 because of the number of pregnancies, and we were told of three women who became pregnant in a regional centre in the previous year.

When asked what they saw as the advantages of being here, a focus group of Fijian women said food in the supermarket, pay rate compared to home, standard of living, and access to services.

Chapter 3 Conclusion

Chapter 3 focused on the research findings that related to access to support for PALM scheme workers while they are in Australia. Workers’ experiences of pre-departure preparation, information and skills development were often less than ideal. Once in Australia, much hinged on the AEs and their efforts to be supportive and upfront about pay, work conditions and deductions. It was notable that smaller AEs can struggle with their obligations to take a comprehensive approach to their workers’ safety and wellbeing. AEs are required to engage welfare officers and, in some instances, pay team leaders extra for their responsibilities, but we heard of limitations in the coverage, independence and skills of those in these positions. Further formal mechanisms in place to support workers include CLOs, although not all countries have them; the Community Connections program, which has a constrained role; and the promising introduction of Pacific Labour Mobility Officers. The Pacific Labour Facility has

progressively rolled out support mechanisms including the telephone hotline and the RAFs, with the seemingly most successful instances of implementation involving funded individuals and organisations with high levels of Pacific, Timorese and Australian cultural understanding, operating in regional areas close to where employers and PALM scheme workers are located. This is unsurprising as the study found major barriers to seeking help were workers' reticence, fear of losing their jobs and lack of confidence with language and navigating the local context. Other avenues of support, that is, support that is not necessarily provided by the scheme, include unions, the diaspora and local community organisations, much of it undertaken on a voluntary basis. Local knowledge, of regional and remote services and of the communities in which workers reside and work, is vital, given the well-publicised difficulties in accessing basic and specialist services outside of urban areas. The case study of the meat processing industry in regional NSW illustrated the range and the importance of the number of workers and their countries of origin in different sites. The PLF incident data showed that a large number of recorded welfare issues can be concentrated disproportionately in certain abattoirs, with disengagement more common with such workplaces. The abattoirs are demanding and difficult workplaces, and the challenges can be exacerbated by unsupportive employers and fellow workers, and where groups of workers are in the minority, such as women or people from certain countries.



Cattle raised for meat in regional New South Wales
Photograph courtesy ribeiroantonio/Shutterstock

Chapter 4 – Recommendations from stakeholders and conclusions

Chapter 4 Introduction

This chapter first summarises the main concerns related to workers' safety and wellbeing that emerged from the surveys, interviews and our observations. It then details the recommendations for improvement that stakeholders and workers made in the course of the project. On the basis of the research that was undertaken in 2022, and the views of participants, we document our conclusions and put forward the areas that we believe require more attention. We are aware that the PALM scheme continues to evolve, and that new policies have been outlined in 2023, but we would suggest that constant vigilance and review is required to ensure that the workers are adequately protected and feel they can seek and access appropriate advice and support as required.

Key issues and concerns

Chapter 2 began by stressing how almost everyone we spoke to during the project was supportive of having a Pacific labour mobility scheme. There were, however, differing views on the extent to which workers were well treated and the degree to which they were safe and able to flourish in Australia. On the one hand, there was the kind of perspective expressed by one stakeholder in the survey:

Our own experiences with the workforces has predominantly been a positive one, with very few incidents.

In contrast, the survey and interviews of workers, and many stakeholders, indicated there were key areas that could be improved. Chapter 2 outlined in some depth the kind of workplace issues that were brought to our attention, including complaints about pay and deductions and workplace safety, most notably in the meat processing industry. In some locations there were large numbers of disengaged workers. Among the workers there was often only limited knowledge of their rights and on what grounds their contracts could be terminated. Not many appeared to be aware of provisions for training and skills development, as their delivery depends on AEs to make the arrangements.

A constellation of issues related to personal safety and wellbeing were highlighted during the course of

the project. Physical and mental health were concerns, exacerbated for many by family separation. Excessive use of alcohol was a problem in some instances, especially where workers were unfamiliar with or had not been able to afford alcohol back home. It was also viewed as a way of dealing with the boredom and pressure of their employment, and as a fundamental aspect of socialising, as seemed to be the local mores surrounding alcohol consumption. Alcohol use was frequently linked to incidents of violence and other criminal behaviour, including dangerous driving. Stress and separation were cited by some participants as contributing to jealousy and ruptures in family and intimate relationships, within a context where domestic violence may not be regarded as a crime back in the home countries.

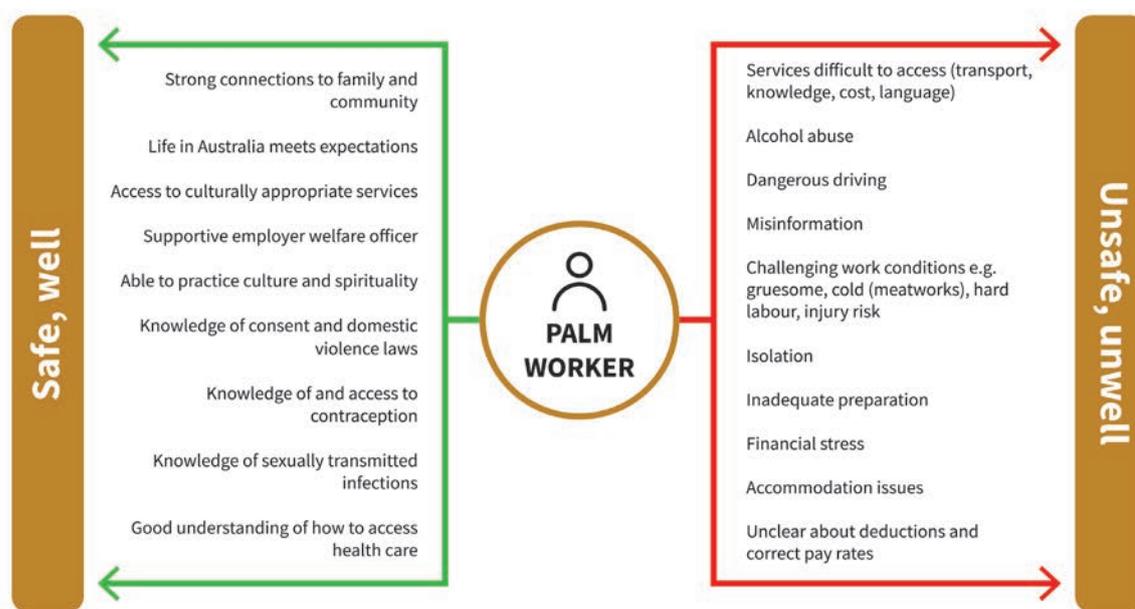
Chapter 3 described the initiatives and mechanisms in place that are designed to assist and inform workers. Although many of these were acknowledged as important, there are limitations to current avenues to access support and information. In this chapter, we referred to criticisms of the pre-departure and post-arrival induction and information about the local community and its services. The scheme has placed considerable onus on employers to enable workers' access to assistance and advice. Some were reported to do a good job, but where the AEs were labour hire companies it was common to hear of intermittent efforts to adequately inform and assist the workers, often from a distance.

It was widely acknowledged that there are endemic challenges in rural and regional Australia that contribute to the experience of PALM scheme workers. This was best demonstrated by the difficulties in securing good and affordable accommodation, in a climate where there is a housing shortage and high costs throughout the country.

Figure 9 summarises the factors that affect the safety and wellbeing of PALM scheme workers, based on our research findings. The left-hand side lists factors that support worker safety and wellbeing, while the items on the right-hand side can contribute to poor safety and wellbeing.

The next section outlines what stakeholders and workers suggested to strengthen the safety net for workers.

Figure 9: Factors affecting safety and wellbeing of PALM scheme workers



Source: Lindy Kanan and Judy Putt. Graphic design by Georgina Ryan.

Stakeholders’ and workers’ views on what needs changing

The impetus behind the Regional Accelerator Forums (RAFs) was to build connections and knowledge at a more local and regional level in order to enhance what was then the PLS and the various provisions relating to workers’ welfare and wellbeing. It rests on the assumption that at the local and regional level there is the social capital, and access to services, that can help both employers and workers. As one stakeholder put it, opportunities exist for services to be more involved. At the RAFs and worker induction or information sessions, various services were suggested as invitees such as local police, women’s and men’s health services, and crisis centres. However, as many participants in the study made clear, there are service gaps in rural and remote areas of Australia. Stakeholders, including AEs, talked of the limited, over-stretched health, police and community services, in addition to the chronic shortage of rental accommodation.

In our online survey, stakeholders were asked to rank a list of six sectors from the one that needed the most strengthening to the one which needed the least strengthening. As Table 21 shows, the stakeholders viewed health and community services as the sectors that should be enhanced or expanded in the areas where PALM workers are engaged. The low ranking of ‘union’ may be reflective of the current modest levels of support for union membership in Australia in general and/or the belief that unions are already strong enough.

We noted the Australian Workers Union and United Workers Union to be relatively active and covering the agricultural sector, while in the meat processing sector the union’s membership and influence has diminished over time. One abattoir worker said the union (AMIEU) had signed them up the previous year, took weekly \$10 dues and ‘did nothing’.

Table 21: Ranking of stakeholders’ views of what sectors need strengthening

Sector	Score	Ranking
Health	5.82	1
Community services	5.22	2
Pacific diaspora organisation	4.55	3
Church	4.40	4
Police	4.02	5
Union	3.08	6
Other	0	0

Source: Stakeholders’ survey (n=53)

Health and community services

A range of challenges were raised in the health sector, including health insurance, waiting lists to see GPs and insufficient specialist services. As Chapter 2 showed, many workers were not aware of the details of how health insurance worked, and some were angry about

deductions and/or that they were not covered by Medicare. Stakeholders urged that more information be available and, importantly, communicated regularly about health insurance and the local availability of health services. Several stakeholders also stressed the importance of recognising the specific health needs of women, related to for example, sexual health and childbirth.

In terms of community services, it was often recognised by AEs and by other stakeholders that employers could not directly provide many services. As one PLF case manager put it:

AEs don't have to be specialist migration services. They just need to be able to recognise issues and refer workers to local services that can assist. (INT61, Pacific Labour Facility staff member)

Stakeholders indicated more could be done to support AEs, and a few mentioned specific specialist multicultural councils or groups that could play an important 'brokering' role. One NGO worker said that the 'multicultural council [in regional town NSW] needs to change — as it is only focusing on refugee and migrant families'. It was also acknowledged by both stakeholders and workers that local churches could be very helpful, with donations of household goods and clothes for example, but the degree to which this happened seemed to vary widely. More culturally attuned forms of support were evident in the connections made to the diaspora or a local pastor (in the community or among workers). Stakeholders, particularly in Queensland where there is a larger presence of diaspora organisations, were eager to see more support for Pacific diaspora organisations that are supporting workers without any dedicated funding. As a result of these less visible and informal forms of support, a number of stakeholders highlighted the crucial role of pastors, churches and sporting groups, and argued for more emphasis on 'outside of work care'. As one stakeholder said, the workers were dealing with isolation, and the pastor did a lot of the 'emotional care'.

A member of a small NGO that worked with their country's diaspora in an urban environment made the case for involving organisations like hers, which are familiar with workplace settings and cost of living in Australia, as well as the country of origin. However, her organisation had struggled to find out how they could connect with workers through the scheme in rural and regional locations.

Adopting more preventative strategies rather than reactive actions were seen as feasible now that the disruptions of COVID-19 restrictions had subsided. For instance, a widespread and more consistent engagement with local police was viewed as essential by a PLF employee, as the police have a key educative role. This stakeholder saw most safety and wellbeing issues as primarily related to alcohol, with excessive use contributing to breakdown in relationships, assaults, domestic violence and sexual assaults. The employee said:

Some places the AE [labour hire company] has banned alcohol in the houses they have leased. But then people will drink in places they shouldn't, for instance parks. I would like to see a 'toolbox' approach, with police involvement in education on alcohol. Also we need to find alternatives to drinking. (INT70, Pacific Labour Facility member of staff)

According to a Welfare Officer employed by a labour hire company, the police are a key partner because they 'usually facilitate and have links to sports people, the council, business sector' and can assist in fostering an environment that is 'based on how a village is created and sustained back home'.

Those involved in helping workers were sometimes critical of what they saw as ignorance or lack of interest of local government. For example, a PLF case manager gave the example of where a rural town of 1000 people had 50 Tongan workers arrive, and the town 'needed to be equipped to support those workers'. According to a PLF case manager 'there's a lot of work to be done with local councils ... AEs can't do it alone'. A police officer said the local council could advise on where workers should have accommodation as they should not have housing in 'areas where there are issues'. A human resources manager employed by a meatworks wanted to see local councils, the host employers and AEs work together on the provision and affordability of accommodation as 'workers can't do it themselves, they need a rental history'.

By and large, there was support for more stakeholder forums at a regional or local level, although as noted in Chapter 3, there was a degree of scepticism that much would happen without obvious drivers and champions. A representative of an employer's association also said that such activities had to be realistic and 'not held during harvesting'.

Workplace and role of employers

A number of stakeholders focused on the workplace and the role of employers. For instance, an AE welfare officer advocated 'transparent information' being relayed by an AE as workers 'get resentful about deductions and abscond'. To stop disengagement, the labour hire companies needed 'to change mind-set. They focus on making money but have to understand what will make them stay'. A worker in an abattoir was keen to see more transparency from an AE labour hire company, with for example, rental agreements.

The stress on accessible and basic information was echoed by a multicultural officer employed by a local government, which should be available in workplaces and about work. This stakeholder believed that companies (the host employers) did not pay enough attention to providing signage and information for workers where English is not their first language. A CLO said there should be fact sheets on health and hygiene, but designed as part of a 'program that should be tailored to those who are unemployed, have low literacy and ignore documents'.

A worker (and a pastor) asserted that ‘we need to fix “inside” first, that is the workplace, then the community’. He wanted AEs and host employers to better explain health insurance (and changes that had been made in the past few years), pay and deductions, and the down times at the abattoirs. He wanted to see the education of employers about Islander ways, a ‘neutral’ information booth at workplaces, and cultural days once a month at workplaces. Increasing the number and improving the attitude of local AE labour hire staff was in his view necessary to foster such changes. In contrast to the large AEs, the smaller operations or businesses indicated they struggle to meet their contractual obligations to provide welfare and support to workers. A smaller AE wanted more tailored support as for a small AE it is ‘hard to put on different hats’.

Some employer representatives were very open about the fact that they did not feel adequately equipped to provide the welfare support to workers that was expected by the government. They noted the way in which the scheme required them to go beyond ‘normal’ boundaries and provide guidance on personal issues in addition to workplace issues.

Improvements in the scheme’s welfare arrangements

Based on workers’ reported experiences, and what stakeholders said, the majority of recommendations related to improvements in the scheme’s welfare arrangements. An AE welfare officer advocated a different approach and learning from what has been effective. In summary, she said:

The current welfare approach is reactive, it needs to be proactive and adopt an outreach model ... Before workers come here, more should be done in the home country about the effects of alcohol, and the risks of excessive drinking ... We have had police at a few meetings here... and I have found using ‘visuals’ makes a difference’. (INT80, welfare officer, AE labour hire company)

Frequently, improving cultural awareness amongst host stakeholders and local communities was flagged in interviews and meetings. A stakeholder who worked in human resources in an abattoir made the following comment, referring to conduct by their non-Pacific workforce:

PALM scheme should focus on cultural awareness of hosts, employers and local people for example, swearing in workplaces and in pubs. For example, one person was sworn at, belittled and they all walked off. You can’t call people names. [Non-Pacific Island country] Workers should not use that kind of language. (INT81, host employer worker)

An AE welfare officer rather acerbically commented that the ‘PLF has been talking about a cultural framework for employers for over three years, and still haven’t got it’.¹⁴ At the RAFs, a range of recommendations were made by participants. These included improving response times when complaints are raised, and AEs and the PLF following up on training and education. At a RAF in NSW, it was stated that their state was behind other states in responding to the increased presence of Pacific workers in rural communities, and that more attention should be given to NSW.

Workers disengaging was recognised as symptomatic of dissatisfaction or unhappiness among workers, this was revealed in interviews with individuals, and more obliquely at RAFs. Addressing disengagement was viewed by several stakeholders as a priority, with an employers’ association representative calling for ‘clear decisive action against illegal operators who steal workers and who have no insurance’. Another stakeholder emphasised the implications for the diaspora because the workers, after disengaging, ‘become a problem for family and community here’ and argued that more should be done to address the issues that cause disengagement. An AE who also employed temporary skilled workers made the comment that these workers can apply for permanent residency, which acts a motivation to stay. Pointedly, a CLO wanted action taken against non-AEs that ‘lure workers’.

Various suggestions at the RAFs related to the then current organisation of welfare and support. For example, it was argued that the responsibilities of the LSUs and CLOs should be more clearly defined, especially when a worker is in an accident, or there is a death or other kinds of major event.

An employers’ association representative said there was too much ‘red tape’ which should be reduced by streamlining the scheme and cutting back on reporting requirements and paperwork.

Workers were more likely to refer to the immediate contact in the workplace – the AE welfare officer – as requiring change, compared with other aspects of the scheme/program. It was stated that ‘more could be done’ by the welfare officer, and in one location, the team leader wanted to see a welfare officer position in the workplace ‘to oversee the Pacific Islander workforce, one contact person for the diverse countries, who can engage directly with the host employer, and which results in streamlining’. Several workers thought there should be more awareness raising of the PLF hotline.

At the time of the research, there was general interest among workers in government talk of expanding the scheme to allow families to accompany workers engaged under the scheme in Australia, and the potential for pathways to more permanent residency. One worker indicated she would like to see more women workers and would like to have more couples involved. Almost all workers supported having their families with them while they worked, although a few were concerned about their capacity to save a significant sum if they

had to support their families in Australia. Even though workers said they would continue to have ties with and would visit their home countries, those interviewed did want to stay in Australia in the longer term and were eager to know how this might be achieved.

Agency of workers

A common view was that the workers needed the support and opportunity to communicate with employers and service providers. It was seen as also vital to convey useful and timely information that could assist workers to make decisions on what they should do in different situations. Some comments we received in the stakeholder survey and in interviews regarding worker agency were:

Workers must have open mind and be able to speak up, good communication helps everyone to understand better. This will result in us creating a working team.

We need to use the workers more and understand that they're not just labourers. We don't see them just as labourers, but they're actually family members and they have lots of social capital. And there's a lot of potential for them to influence the program for the better, because we can learn off them.

There is an opportunity for information to go directly to workers and allow them to make their own decisions.

A police officer would like to have leaders among workers who he could work with on problems that crop up after hours and at weekends. To reduce these problems, he wanted to see more effort invested in increasing workers' knowledge of the law, especially around driving and alcohol, and of what is 'culturally acceptable' in Australia.

Employers banning alcohol consumption by workers was a controversial issue that came through in interviews and among discussions at RAFs. Some AEs have banned drinking at any time, while others prohibit its use only within the accommodation quarters (and of course the workplace). People we spoke with were cognisant of the tensions between regulation and personal freedom. For example, some felt that 'dry site' and 'dry accommodation' policies encroach on the freedoms of workers to spend their leisure time how they wish.

Key findings and conclusions

Support mechanisms provided by the PALM scheme

1. Initiatives by the PLF such as the Regional Accelerator Forums, creating regional networks and placing Regional Relationship Managers in regional locations have improved stakeholder

collaboration, which in turn has a positive impact on worker welfare.

2. Recruitment of staff with Pacific Island and Indigenous heritage by the PLF has led to quality activities that are culturally informed. (For example, talanoa sessions at RAFs, networking events that celebrate Pacific culture and the work being done by the PLF Cultural Competency Manager).
3. In some locations that we visited, the Community Connections program is playing an important role in connecting approved employers with services, and also connecting PALM scheme workers with relevant health and wellbeing services. In other locations, there was no visibility of the Community Connections program.
4. Placing all of the responsibility for worker welfare on to approved employers is problematic. Not only are the AEs overburdened, it also means that workers do not have access to confidential support when sensitive issues arise. There are also power imbalances due to the workers' dependence on their employer for their job and visa. An independent, locally available (face to face) and culturally safe mechanism is needed to support workers with issues that they are not comfortable raising with their employer.
5. Instead of continually expanding the role of employers, other support organisations could be engaged to support or educate workers on specialised topics.
6. In some locations that we visited, PALM scheme workers were isolated from the Australian societies in which they were living. Cross-cultural understanding and engagement with local communities need to be at the heart of the delivery of the PALM scheme.

Other services

7. Existing migrant settlement services may have the right skills and knowledge to support PALM scheme workers as the workers face many of the same barriers as humanitarian and other migrants. This is an existing network that could be leveraged.
8. Queensland, with its large Pacific diaspora, has many culturally safe services in place in urban locations. PALM scheme workers in regional locations would greatly benefit from some of these programs (e.g. nutrition education, sexual and reproductive health).
9. There is an opportunity to learn from work being done in New Zealand and south-east Queensland to provide culturally appropriate services for Pacific Islanders. For example, New Zealand has a dedicated Ministry for Pacific Peoples¹⁵ and also provides a guide for Pacific migrants (New Zealand Immigration 2023). South-east Queensland has a number of examples including

Pacific liaison officers within the Queensland Police Service, and the Good Start program in the health sector (Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service 2023).

10. Pacific diaspora organisations, and multicultural and other local organisations, require funding for the support that they are voluntarily providing to PALM scheme workers.
11. Access to services in regional Australia is inadequate. This affects PALM scheme workers who are already disadvantaged in accessing services due to language and cultural barriers and a lack of understanding of systems and services.
12. PALM scheme workers need access to internet and mobile coverage. A lack of mobile reception in remote areas where workers are living has implications for worker safety and wellbeing.
13. There is an urgent need to skill up and recruit translators to the national Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) consistent with the languages spoken by PALM scheme workers.

Policy and governance

14. The PALM scheme, a federal government program, appears to operate in isolation from state and local governance mechanisms, which has implications for worker safety and wellbeing. The PALM scheme could consider models such as the National Settlement Framework which provides a framework for how federal, state and local governments support migrants in Australia.
15. PALM scheme workers are not eligible for many services that would benefit their welfare because of their temporary visa status. For example, access to Medicare related services such as mental health care plans and maternity services. Additionally, some migrant and multicultural services don't see them as their target population since they are 'only temporary'.
16. Accommodation providers are a key stakeholder who are sometimes overlooked even though their services can have a substantial impact on safety and wellbeing of PALM scheme workers. The Australian Government could consider how accommodation providers can be included within the regional networks and worker support models.
17. Some approved employers display behaviours and attitudes that could be described as gender discriminatory, exploitative and controlling.

Transparency

18. Greater program transparency and sharing of data could optimise delivery of the PALM scheme. Services and communities can better support PALM scheme workers if they have

information on the numbers of workers in their area and what languages they speak. We received this feedback from hospitals, health services, police and local government officials. Many of these services have cultural liaison roles, or potential for these roles if there is an identified need.

Health

19. Access to primary health care is inadequate in many rural areas. Some PALM scheme workers do not have access to the health care services that they require.
20. PALM scheme workers need access to free or low cost, culturally appropriate counselling and mental health services.
21. PALM scheme workers need access to culturally appropriate education and support regarding sexual and reproductive health issues, including prevention and screening services.
22. It would be useful for PALM scheme women to receive culturally tailored information on menstrual hygiene and menstrual products available in Australia (e.g. reusable products which are more sustainable and can save money for workers over time).
23. There is an opportunity to take a preventative rather than reactive approach to health care.
24. There is an opportunity for the Australian Government to work with the PALM scheme preferred health insurance provider to ensure that PALM scheme workers can access culturally safe telehealth appointments.
25. Queensland Health has a Pacific cultural liaison officer at Logan hospital (Queensland Health 25/8/2023). There would be great value in having these types of positions located where there are high concentrations of PALM scheme workers.

Worker safety

26. PALM scheme workers need access to driver education before driving on Australian roads.
27. There is more that the Australian Government can do to protect women participating in the PALM scheme, including ensuring that all workers receive education about sexual consent, sexual assault, and domestic violence laws in the Australian state where they reside. The information needs to be delivered in a culturally appropriate manner.

Worker wellbeing

28. Throughout our study we encountered the most problematic accounts of worker mistreatment and underpayment in the meat processing industry, which is dominated by labour hire companies. While some labour hire companies

are providing an excellent service and contributing to the PALM scheme good news stories, others are clearly focused on profit at the expense of workers. Closer monitoring is needed in this sector, as well as opportunities for workers to raise issues without fear of reprisal.

29. We noted the highly gendered nature of workplaces, especially the meat processing industry, and the implications that this has for women's safety and access to support and services. We observed that team leaders are predominantly male, and this can mean that women's needs and views are not being adequately represented.
30. In our interviews, worker deductions were a common source of angst. While recognising the administrative burden that deductions have on employers, it is important to find ways for transparency to be improved and for over-inflated deductions to be eliminated.

Worker training and development

31. Many PALM scheme workers are interested in participating in training and skills development activities in Australia. Skills training funds are available through the PLF, but workers can only access this training if it is initiated by their AE. Many workers would value guidance on how to access training without being dependent on their employer.

Further research

32. This small study had many limitations and touched on a number of areas that we believe require further research and investigation. These include, in particular, experiences of PALM scheme workers in the meat processing industry, and social issues including domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment and sexual and reproductive health.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

Undertaken at a particular moment in time, in 2022, the research was conducted during a period of flux in the scheme and the easing of pandemic measures. The SWP-PLS alignment was not complete, with separate deeds and overlapping roles. The new federal government had also signalled further changes and a review and consultations continued into 2023. When we talked with stakeholders and workers it was clear that there was profound relief that the COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted, but many reflected on how challenging it had been during the time of border closures and periods of isolation. The PLS in particular was a focus of our study and there was a significant increase in the number of workers entering Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions to meet the demands of employers, most notably in the meat industry. The rapid rise in numbers created what many described as a reactive approach

to dealing with workers' safety and wellbeing issues. It is hardly surprising that these issues are only being dealt with more systematically and structurally by proposed changes in Pacific labour mobility. Having said that, many factors that impinge on workers' safety and wellbeing require monitoring and ongoing sensitive handling irrespective of macro-changes to the structure and governance of the PALM scheme.

From our research, we argue for an emphasis on agency, transparency, culture and access. Our findings indicate that workers have low visibility in local communities, and as state and local government policy priorities. Under the scheme, AEs are responsible for workers' welfare, which is an onus that some may not meet and does not properly reflect the responsibility and demand placed on local workplaces and services. The arrangements that were in place often resulted in constraining workers' agency because of their fear of losing their job and visa, and created a dependency on the employer as they relied on the latter to make health insurance claims and enrol them in skills training.

Although workers had showed great resilience and ability to foster links with fellow workers and others in the local communities who shared a cultural or national background, it was apparent that many workplaces and communities frequently knew little about the Pacific region and the different countries of origin and the experience of being a PALM worker. A consequence was limited options for independent, local, and culturally safe support, in a context where there is often a dearth of basic and specialist services. Importantly, making data and information on worker numbers, industry, country of origin and so forth available and in a timely fashion to regional and local services can only help in building the vision of a more collective communities of care approach that underpins the RAF initiative.

Opportunities to improve support for workers

There is a need for local structures to support workers, and they need to be tailored for the different local operating environments. At a structural level, stronger and more strategic effort is required to ensure consistent and widespread links and involvement with key organisations such as local multicultural organisations, Pacific diaspora organisations and local governments. While in theory this is already in place to some extent through the 'community of care' model, we found that there was limited visibility or implementation in the communities that we visited. Funding for local community events would assist, along with government funding and support for a wider constellation of Pacific diaspora organisations.

Migrant settlement services have the right skills and knowledge to support PALM workers; however, state funding for multicultural councils does not necessarily explicitly recognise and support activities targeting Pacific Island country communities or temporary workers. Multicultural Australia recently began a three-year 'Worker Rights Project' in Queensland to increase

knowledge on workplace rights for migrants and increase confidence in accessing support. The project aims to work with 100 community leaders to support migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, international students and temporary visa holders. The project was still to be developed at the time of our research, but there are likely to be synergies with the needs of PALM scheme participants.

Involving local government is vital, but there is considerable variation in the level of engagement across the country, according to a PLF community engagement person. This stakeholder said that 'even in remote areas where there are few services, engagement with local government is key. Every community has a Council, every community has a health service. Councils are a first port of call because their remit is to ensure that everyone feels welcomed in a community'. We would like to see a more strategic alliance with local governments that should prioritise local accommodation and access to services, and support for inclusive and welcoming communities.

A more comprehensive and creative approach to communication with and between all parties can only enhance the PALM scheme, and contribute to improvements in workers' safety and wellbeing. These include:

- Continuing with the workers' hotline but review workers' and AEs' awareness of it, and whether it is serving its purpose, including timely follow-up action. However, having it should not take away from the importance of face-to-face support mechanisms.
- Advocating an outreach model by welfare officers employed by AEs.
- Facilitating access to and use of social media, to enable communication among workers including the cohort they arrived with in Australia, with family and kin back home, and the diaspora groups and networks.
- Supporting regular local information sessions and social activities that harness local advocates and networks.
- Promoting the advantages of the PALM scheme to Australian communities, which includes the contribution to the Australian economy through AEs' profits, workers' expenditure on goods and rent, and workers' donations.

It will be vital to watch how the federal government plans are implemented over the next few years as they will have a serious and widespread effect on home countries, workers and local communities in Australia. The safety and wellbeing of workers, and their families, must remain a central concern.

Endnotes

1. See [Ministry for Pacific Peoples](#).
 2. This figure of 31,500 includes 11,087 long-term and 20,413 short-term workers.
 3. In June 2023, changes were made so that approved employers are required to pay PALM scheme workers in line with other workers at the same workplace, that is, with workers with the same skill level and experience doing the same job (DEWR 5/6/2023:2).
 4. See PALM, [Payroll Deductions Explained](#).
 5. PowerPac is the business name for NQ Powertrain which has been the subject of Fair Work Ombudsman court action. See Fair Work Ombudsman, [Queensland Labour-Hire Company Faces Court for Alleged Underpayment of 87 Visa Holders, 4/11/2022](#).
 6. See PALM, [Skills Development](#).
 7. Worker resources are available in English, Bislama, Samoan, Tuvaluan, Tok Pisin, Tongan, Fijian, Gilbertese, Tetum and Solomon Island Pijin. See PALM, [Resources](#).
 8. We refer to it here as the 'employment department' as the department name and acronym has changed multiple times in recent years.
 9. Secondary visa holders are accompanying dependents such as spouses and children.
 10. The actual names of meatworks and of locations are avoided when the detail of PLF recorded critical incidents are provided.
 11. The total number of workers for host employers is slightly different to AEs — the total number of workers in NSW for host companies was 942.
 12. We were told these 'stand down' periods are a regular feature of the meat processing industry, caused by farmers not sending as many animals to the abattoirs.
 13. Since the research was conducted, information sheets have been made available on what to expect for different industries in Australia, including the meatworks. See PALM, [Jobs Australia](#).
 14. The 'Guidelines for engaging with Pasifika Peoples' (Fa'avale n.d.) provide seven areas of advice:
 1. Strengths-based: Ensure projects are focused on the strengths, abilities and assets of Pasifika peoples. This approach empowers individuals and groups to acknowledge and take control of behaviour or outcomes that counter this.
 2. Reciprocity: Ensure there is a reciprocal outcome to any project that primarily benefits Pasifika peoples. Examples are to reimburse costs and time, and ensure capacity building is a key component.
 3. Meaningful engagement: Ensure there is genuine, honest and open dialogue with a shared purpose for the engagement. Create an environment where Pasifika people have a 'voice' — an opportunity to share openly and with autonomy.
 4. Capacity building: Building capacity and opportunities for Pasifika peoples through upskilling and post-project/work pathways is important.
 5. Shared values: Cultural protocols, traditions and practices are underpinned by values — the value-base is where the sameness lies. Ensuring your practice is values-based will assist you to achieve common ground.
 6. Collaboration: Pasifika peoples are collective — they work for the greater good. Providing positive, effective and sustainable impact requires collaborative and multidisciplinary effort.
 7. Cultural competency: Seek advice and consultation on culturally-competent and culturally responsive practices.
15. See Ministry for Pacific Peoples, [About Us](#).

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