Disengagement Taskforce Report Summary

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme is central to the Australian Government's commitment to meet national labour needs, while simultaneously forging stronger links with participating Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste.

Sustained PALM scheme worker disengagement will threaten the viability of the scheme; this is particularly concerning from the perspective of worker welfare, wellbeing and safety. Once a PALM scheme worker becomes disengaged, they are no longer able to access the protections of the scheme, often leaving them vulnerable and at risk of exploitation.

The number of PALM scheme workers disengaging increased as the scheme grew significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to a large-scale disengagement incident in 2023, the PALM scheme Interdepartmental Disengagement Taskforce (the Taskforce) was established. Taskforce members include government agencies that are involved in or impacted by the PALM scheme. The Taskforce had a phased approach – Phase 1 concluded in February 2024 and examined the large-scale disengagement issue as a case study, identifying insights and lessons learnt as well as summarising Taskforce and stakeholder views which were delivered to Government.

Phase 2 commenced in July 2024 and focused on consultations with over 40 key PALM scheme stakeholders to identify push and pull factors for disengagement, potential trigger points which could lead to disengagement, and opportunities or recommendations that could better prevent, deter, detect and respond to disengagement.

The final report includes six high-level recommendations, as below, developed and agreed by Taskforce agencies.

1. Repatriation and reengagement strategies working with each partner country for current disengaged cohort

2. Continue relevant agencies' regulatory and compliance activities and deliver associated awareness-raising initiatives

3. Strengthen PALM scheme operational policy to address disengagement

4. Develop a comprehensive communications strategy

5. Develop a cross-agency data strategy to improve the speed of detection and the response to disengagement, strengthen data quality and data-sharing arrangements

6. Develop a quantitative and qualitative methodology to evaluate the impact of actions implemented through the Taskforce

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) will coordinate and report on the delivery of the recommendations with support from partner agencies.