

Family Accompaniment Pilot Mid-Term Evaluation Summary

September 2025



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Introduction

The family accompaniment (FA) pilot (2024-2027) is an initiative to allow up to 200 long-term Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme workers to bring their families to Australia. The pilot aims to reduce the negative social impacts of long periods of family separation and strengthen ties with the Pacific and Timor-Leste. The first families arrived in Australia in August 2024, and as of 31 July 2025, 145 families had arrived in Australia from the 5 participating countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Timor-Leste, Tonga and Vanuatu).

This summary report presents the main findings and recommendations of the mid-term evaluation. The evaluation draws on the baseline report, quarterly monitoring reports, program documents and interviews with 116 pilot stakeholders, including 74 participating families.

Most families were at an early stage in their settlement journey. As families spend more time in Australia their experiences will continue to evolve.

As families have not commenced returning home, this report does not include findings related to demobilisation or reintegration of families. Information on these components will be captured through the ongoing rolling-reviews and final evaluation planned for late 2027.

Evaluation Findings

Pilot progress so far

In brief:

Overall, the FA pilot is progressing well against its expected outcomes, despite some challenges. Families were generally well-prepared for life in Australia due to participation in pre-decision and pre-departure briefings, and individual support from Family Accompaniment Coordinators (FACs) in Labour Sending Units (LSUs). Employers are meeting obligations and often providing additional support, though some administrative issues were identified. Families are accessing key services, but there have been some delays and slow uptake of some entitlements. This includes delays receiving Medicare cards and time taken to apply for Family Tax Benefit (FTB). There are positive signs of families managing their own welfare and integrating with communities, although finding affordable and suitable housing has been a challenge. A notable unintended outcome is the high number of non-accompanying children, driven by families' practical concerns such as wanting to first find spouse employment or better accommodation, the cost of living in Australia, time remaining on visas, and not wanting to disrupt their child's schooling at home. Roles introduced by the Australian Government to support the delivery of the pilot, namely FACs in sending countries and Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) in Australia, have made valued contributions to all outcomes. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) convening role has been critical to resolving challenges.

Family preparation in sending countries

Families generally felt well-prepared for life in Australia, although they faced challenges on arrival, such as language barriers, unfamiliar online systems (such as for job applications and government services), and the cost of living. The pilot included structured half day pre-decision and 3 – 4 day pre-departure briefings, which were well-received and helped families make informed choices about participation.

FACs played a key role in helping families collect necessary visa documents and prepare for travel. However, visa delays and logistical hurdles — such as navigating airport transits — created stress for some families.

Employer support and responsibilities

PALM scheme employers (employers) are largely meeting their obligations under the pilot. Several respondents, including FLOs and workers, reported that some Employers had gone 'above and beyond' their formal obligations. This might reflect the eligibility criteria and selection process for the pilot which were designed to mitigate risks and ensure only Employers with a history of good performance under PALM were included.

Employers have supported families with accommodation, local service connections, and settlement advice. Some proactively assessed community readiness and tailored support to individual family needs.

I believe there was a bit of work involved. But for the right candidate, it's worth putting in that extra time... Before we were even approved, I looked at schools in the area to see which ones had more resources to support English second language students, saw that as part of our due diligence. (Employer staff)

Employers reported feeling well-supported to perform their responsibilities, which they saw as appropriate, although they found the process to submit visa applications for family members difficult. Some stakeholders raised concerns about inconsistent Employer communication during visa processing and delays in reporting family arrivals.

Family access to services and entitlements in Australia

FLOs provided families with on-arrival briefings (OAB), connected them with relevant local services, and provided additional support where required during the 12-week settlement period. Families are accessing key services such as Medicare, FTB, and the Child Care Subsidy, although it is not certain that all families eligible for FTB have applied.

'The FLO was very helpful and was there all along. FLO gave the briefing for all the steps to follow – the children's school, the application of the Medicare card. FLO was very supportive in providing information and how to access services as well. She also assisted in accessing services.' (Participant spouse)

Thirty per cent of interviewed workers and spouses reported using Medicare to access medical and health services. Despite this, some families experienced delays in receiving Medicare cards and cited confusion about how to claim benefits. At least 2 families initially received letters declining their Medicare application, citing ineligibility due to their visa subclass.

Private health insurance is strongly encouraged, but is not mandated for participating families, due to Medicare eligibility. Uptake of private health insurance has been low, with only 16% of families having taken up the NIB private health insurance package. This means families do not have cover for costs not covered by Medicare, such as ambulance or repatriation costs.

All school-aged children are enrolled in school, and families report positive experiences with education providers.

Workers and spouses unanimously reported that schools welcomed their children, across varying child ages, nationalities, English proficiencies, and locations. FLOs noted that primary and secondary schools offer a range of programs to support children with English as a second language.

'I'm yet to meet a school that isn't going above and beyond. Every school is doing what they can.' (FLO)

Only a small number of children are enrolled in formal child care. Cost and availability of places are barriers for some families, while some spouses in casual employment were unable to commit to regular child care days.

Families in more remote locations (e.g. Tennant Creek in NT, Jackson in QLD) had minimal local access to formal services, but this was offset by supportive community networks. These families tended to benefit from strong local networks for support, including through Employers and the church, which appeared to be meeting their support needs. Like all families, FLOs had provided face to face OAB to this cohort, on-demand virtual support as issues arose, and had linked them to Services Australia for virtual support with applications for Medicare and FTB.

Family agency and community integration

Families are demonstrating resilience and independence, building strong community networks through churches, diaspora groups, schools, and sports clubs. Most families report feeling welcomed and supported in their local communities.

'Fijian families, the wives we catch up every week, shopping when our husbands are not in town. When I came here, I was the last one, so they were giving tips. For example, how to use the bus and take me around to know the places.' (Participant spouse)

Families were using existing knowledge and networks of PALM workers to self-manage. When asked to nominate their 'main source of support and information since arriving' 64% of spouses nominated their partner, i.e. the PALM worker.

As expected in the pilot design, finding suitable and affordable housing was a challenge, particularly in competitive rental markets. While Employers were obligated to assist workers to find suitable accommodation, workers were ultimately responsible for securing accommodation for their families before arrival. Workers found it easier to find accommodation when they used their established PALM community and diaspora networks. Many couples without accompanying children opted to share housing with other couples. Accommodation that was arranged by Employers (29% of cases), with rent deducted from employee pay, seemed to be favoured by workers for its convenience.

Visa delays have complicated efforts to secure accommodation before family arrival, and some families have deferred bringing children due to housing constraints. Despite these challenges, families generally expressed satisfaction with their living arrangements once settled.

Non-accompanying children

An unintended development during pilot implementation was the significant number of non-accompanying children. By the end of July 2025, data showed that 27 families had deferred the arrival of 69 children they had initially intended to bring to Australia, compared with 137 children who had joined their parents in Australia. This trend was not anticipated in the pilot design and reflects a range of practical and personal considerations. Families cited reasons such as:

- wanting to first secure employment and suitable accommodation
- concerns about cost of living in Australia
- limited time remaining on visas, and/or
- not wanting to disrupt children's schooling at home.

Some stakeholders viewed this trend as misaligned with the pilot's core objective of supporting family unity. Others noted that temporary separation of children is culturally accepted in many Pacific Island countries and Timor-Leste, and that families should be trusted to make decisions based on their own circumstances.

In response to concerns about children remaining at home, program settings were adjusted to allow families to apply for visas for children that had not been listed on the original application. FACs and FLOs also strengthened messaging to help families make informed decisions about child accompaniment.

All interviewed parents reported frequent and consistent communication with both children and carers in their home countries, typically daily via platforms like WhatsApp and Messenger. They expressed strong trust in carers, with all saying they had not had to raise concerns about the quality of their children's care. Broader Pacific Labour Mobility Support Program (PLMSP) evidence also highlighted the efforts of PALM worker couples to prepare their children for periods of separation, and LSU and FAC interviewees were not aware of any families where children's care or wellbeing was in question. One parent said that while they miss their children very much:

'They are doing very well. Their carer is always sending their performance reports, and we talk to their teachers at school. If something happens, they will let us know. Going so well, my husband's brother goes to the school and shows us the reports from the school.' (Participant spouse)

Contributions of pilot staff and agencies

FACs in sending countries and FLOs in Australia (team of 3 full time staff plus a Family Accompaniment Manager) have made central contributions to pilot progress. These staff were recruited by PLMSP with funding from the Australian Government.

FLOs delivered a consistent level of support despite dispersed caseloads, linking with other service providers where possible. FLOs played a central coordinating role, linking families to Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) providers in each location, wherever available. This ensured families could access migrant support services beyond the initial settlement phase. FLOs also arranged for Community Connections representatives to attend OAB.

The FLO model, which includes providing an OAB, connecting families to local services and coordinating the response to any serious incidents involving a family member, received a lot of positive feedback. But its feasibility is questionable if the FA client base was larger and/or more dispersed.

Recruitment of FACs eased the burden on LSUs associated with guiding families through their preparations. FACs carried out a range of practical responsibilities in the period leading up to family departures. They served as primary contacts for spouses, coordinating visa documentation to send to Employers for submission, delivering pre-departure briefings, and supporting travel logistics.

As challenges, LSUs and FACs noted initial confusion when the pilot was first publicly announced, before LSUs were adequately informed as to how the pilot would be designed and implemented. Also, the approach to pre-departure communication with selected families had to be adjusted when it became clear that families were not reaching out to LSUs for support. Lastly, FACs faced some challenges helping families with visa applications in coordination with Employers.

Broadly, PLMSP, DFAT, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) and The Department of Home Affairs (HA) performed their roles effectively. DFAT's convening role has been essential in resolving challenges as they arise. Administrative disconnects between the pilot and broader PALM systems presented challenges for DEWR.

Family wellbeing in Australia

In brief:

At this relatively early stage in their journey, accompanying families reported a positive experience in Australia, with some noting improvements in wellbeing, family relationships, spouse employment, and community integration. The cost of living has been manageable for participating families, particularly where spouses are employed. Ninety-five per cent of families remitted money home regularly. Where spouses were not employed, families had lower levels of savings.

Personal benefits

Workers and spouses described a range of personal benefits following family reunion, such as reduced stress, better sleep, and stronger family bonds.

'I spend my time with my family and we are going to holidays in the weekend. I have a lot of time with my family. Before my family came, I was only working and not enjoying - locked up in my room, not going out much. Now we spend more time going out.' (Participant worker)

'I feel like there's a lot that has changed because we don't feel jealous of each other.' (Participant spouse)

They also reported that children are adjusting well to school and social life, with many improving English language skills, receiving academic recognition, and participating in sports and community activities.

'The children are settling well, they are making good friends, children helping each other. The children, the girls play volleyball and basketball, and they enjoy it. Saturday the girls go for the community work, they are happy to do that.' (Participant spouse)

Spouses have high rates of employment (85% of those interviewed), with around half employed by the same Employer as their partner, the PALM worker. Spouse employment is contributing significantly to household income and savings. Common barriers to spouse employment included English proficiency, lack of a driver's licence or Working with Children Check, and unfamiliarity with online job application processes.

Several spouses had prior qualifications, including in teaching and care professions, that were not recognised in Australia. Many spouses expressed an interest in further training but faced barriers such as English language proficiency and course fees. Among those interviewed, 77% said they or another family member would be willing to enrol in further education or training if fee waivers for international students were available.

Families also reported strong connections with local diaspora, churches, and community groups, enhancing their sense of belonging.

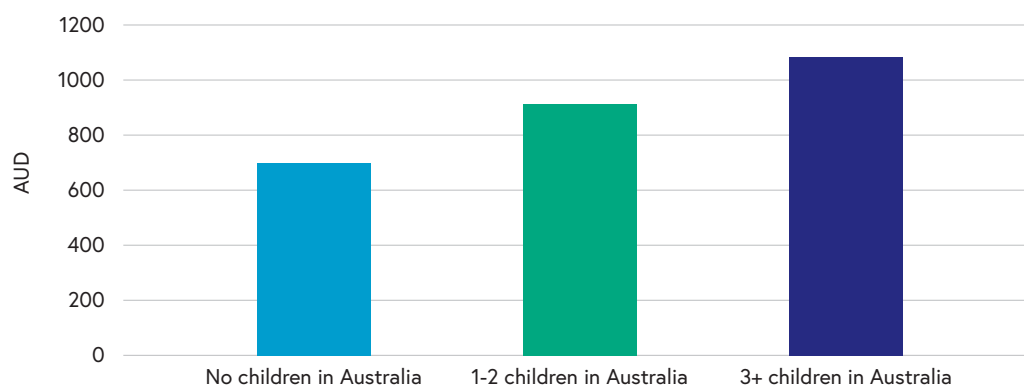
'We have activities with the community especially in the church and also with the local councils. Sometimes we in charge of choir in the church and participate in cultural dancing to the community when there's festivals held in Warrnambool.' (Participant spouse)

Managing the cost of living

The cost of living has generally been manageable for participating families, with an estimated weekly surplus income of \$843 i.e. combined worker and spouse after-tax income minus expenditure and regular remittances. Most families said the cost of living in Australia was manageable (63%) and in line with their expectations (78%). Only 17% of families reported that life in Australia was more expensive than they expected. Surplus income, savings and remittances were highest among couples without accompanying children and families where the spouse was employed.

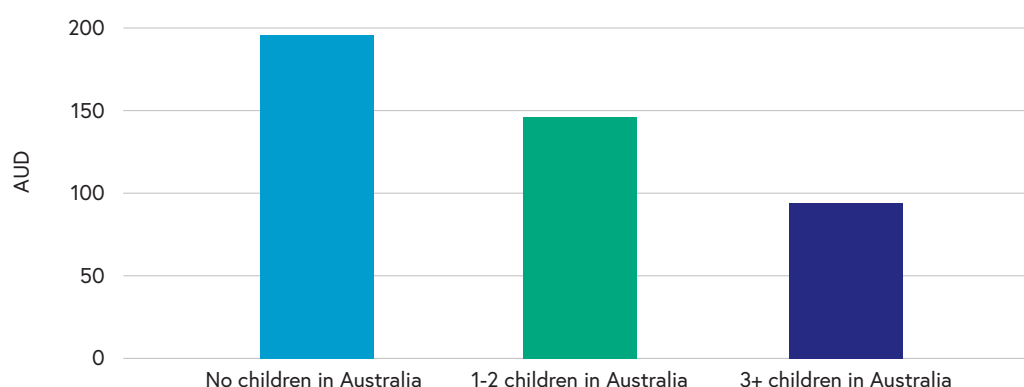
The average reported combined weekly income (PALM worker and spouse) of interviewed families was \$1,817, after tax. Average weekly expenditure was \$812. Families with more accompanying children tended to report higher living expenses.

Average estimated weekly expenditure by number of children in Australia



Ninety-five per cent of families remitted money home regularly, averaging \$162 per week. Families with more children in Australia tended to remit less.

Average weekly remittances by number of children in Australia



Spouse employment was a key factor in financial resilience. Families with employed spouses had nearly three times the surplus income of those without, and significantly higher savings. Where spouses were not employed, families faced tighter budgets. However, respondents in this cohort also felt their situation was manageable, with only 38% saying they had to cut back on some expenses.

On average, families reported saving over \$11,000 to date. Only 58% of workers knew, at this stage of their time in Australia, how to access their superannuation once they returned home.

Perspectives on the pilot design

In brief:

Stakeholders broadly supported the rationale behind the pilot and considered its eligibility criteria, supports and obligations for both workers and employers to be appropriate. One concern raised by various respondents was the definition of a family member as set by Australia's migration regulations, which excludes extended family members — particularly grandparents — from eligibility.

Worker and family perspectives

The most common reason cited by workers and spouses for participating in the pilot was the opportunity to reunite as a family. The requirement for workers to complete 12 months of their placement before their families could join was generally supported, as it allowed workers to establish themselves and prepare for their families' arrival. However, delays in visa processing extended periods of separation and will ultimately reduce the time families can spend together in Australia.

'When I set foot in Australia, I had a plan. I had 4 children and a wife, and my main goal was to bring them over here...I have my wife with me and shortly I will get the kids here as well. I am very happy that this opportunity made me realise my dream.' (Participant worker)

The definition of 'family member' for visa purposes — limited to spouses and dependent children under 23¹ — was seen as culturally misaligned. In many sending countries, grandparents and other extended relatives are integral to family life and childcare. Australian Government representatives noted that a change to the definition of a 'member of the family unit' would be misaligned with Australia's broader visa framework.

The requirement for spouses to have basic English skills was widely supported, although no formal testing was conducted. Many spouses, particularly from Timor-Leste, enrolled in English language classes after arriving in Australia, and both workers and spouses emphasised the importance of language proficiency for successful settlement.

Across all stakeholder groups, there was strong appreciation for the range of supports provided to families, including pre-departure briefings, case management, and access to government services and payments. These supports were seen as critical to helping families navigate their transition to life in Australia.

The requirement for workers to secure accommodation before their families arrived was not questioned, despite practical challenges involved. Some workers faced difficulties finding affordable and suitable housing, particularly for children, but the obligation was considered necessary.

Families were also expected to cover their own travel and pre-mobilisation costs. While this was generally accepted, it may have discouraged some families from applying. In some cases, workers reported that employers covered these costs on a reimbursable basis via worker salary deductions.

¹ For full definition, see Migration Regulations 1994 No. 268 - REG 1.12(2) 'Member of the family unit', accessed 19 August, 2025

Employer perspectives

Employers understood and supported the pilot's Employer eligibility criteria, which required them to have at least 18 months of experience as direct PALM employers and a strong performance record. Employers were also expected to endorse and submit FA applications on behalf of workers — a requirement that was seen as appropriate and helpful for managing risks and selecting suitable candidates.

Eighty per cent of interviewed employers felt that their obligations under the pilot were reasonable. While the pilot is still at an early stage, some employers reported positive outcomes, including improved worker morale, better attendance, spouse employment, and enhanced cultural diversity in their communities.

'The [aged care] workers are so happy. The residents pick up on that. Happy worker is a 110% bonus for us.'
(Employer staff)

Labour Sending Unit (LSU) perspectives

The pilot was introduced in response to concerns from sending countries about the social impacts of family separation. Four out of 5 LSU leaders thought the FA pilot was well-aligned with their government's priorities and were supportive of any future FA expansion.

Some LSU respondents reflected on broader benefits of the pilot, such as education opportunities for children, family member exposure to new and different experiences, and expanding income generation for families via spouse employment. One LSU representative, however, indicated that their government preferred to support families at home rather than facilitate accompaniment.

Some LSU managers also raised concerns about potential unintended consequences of the pilot, including the risk of brain drain, family safety issues, reduced remittances, and the wellbeing of extended family members left behind.

Managing risks

In brief:

Risk mitigation was central to the FA pilot, with structured supports and active monitoring to manage key risks. Of the anticipated risks, visa delays were a significant issue, causing financial stress and delayed reunifications. This was mitigated through proactive facilitation of the visa application process. So far, serious welfare incidents have been few and well-managed. While respondents raised concerns about spouse employment conditions, there was no evidence of mistreatment. The risk of visa overstays is being actively managed through a staged demobilisation process with families.

Various risk mitigations were built into the pilot design. These included:

- Eligibility criteria and a selection process for participants. These required Employers to have a good track record under PALM, while workers needed to have been in Australia for 10 months at the point of application and have a positive employment record. Family members had to meet 403 visa conditions, agree to attend a pre-departure briefing (PDB), and possess at least basic English skills (although this was not tested). A selection panel also assessed worker and Employer applications based on risk factors such as geographic location, access to essential services including schools, and availability of affordable housing.
- A range of information and supports for families, including a publicly available cost-of-living estimator, pre-decision, pre-departure and on-arrival briefings.
- Additional staffing to support families in sending countries and in Australia and providing access to FTB, Child Care Subsidy and Medicare.

- Engagement of a child protection adviser to inform design settings and develop a child protection action plan.
- Information for families on family and domestic violence supports in their new communities, and development of Standard Operating Procedures to coordinate a response to a domestic violence incident if required.

Risk monitoring and management is continuing. A detailed risk register is maintained and reviewed quarterly, with protocols in place for managing serious incidents.

Noting the pilot's early stage, welfare incidents were few and effectively handled, with 9 serious cases reported, including child car safety concerns and medical emergencies. All were managed in line with agreed protocols.

One risk that materialised was delays in visa submissions and processing, which affected family reunification timelines and imposed financial burdens on workers who had secured housing in advance. Contributing factors included families being slow to initiate applications, family members needing passports, difficulty gathering the required documentation, delays by Employers in submitting documents and processing delays within HA. Visa delays were mitigated through active coordination of visa applications between DFAT, FACs, and HA.

Some Employers have employed spouses participating in the pilot. Spouse employment conditions were raised as a possible concern but no evidence of inequitable treatment was found. However, to mitigate this risk if FA continues, it would be prudent to review Employer obligations when employing spouses.

The risk of families overstaying their visas is being actively managed. Pre-decision and pre-departure briefings stressed the requirement for families to return at the end of their visa. No respondents were aware of any families that had indicated an intention to disengage or illegally overstay. However, several spouses, workers and Employers reported wanting to find legal pathways for families to remain in Australia beyond the current visa period. The FA pilot demobilisation and reintegration support plan includes actions to prepare families for departure, including providing accurate information and options for reintegration activities.

Considerations for any continuation of family accompaniment

If family accompaniment were to continue under the PALM scheme, several aspects of the pilot may need to be revised to support feasibility at scale. These include exploring more cost-effective settlement support models for families, considering tailoring of FA settings to sending country priorities, and system efficiencies relating to participant selection, visa processing, and data integration. Given outcomes for families are uncertain at this point in the pilot, a phased and well-coordinated approach to any future family accompaniment policy would be appropriate, supported by ongoing monitoring and risk management.

Recommendations

For the remainder of pilot implementation (to 2027), the evaluation recommends that PLMSP:

- Reinforce messaging to families about how to make Medicare claims and the importance of private health insurance; as well as follow up with relevant families to understand causes for any FTB delays and identify whether any further support may be required.
- Provide accessible briefings on accessing superannuation as part of demobilisation process, drawing on existing superannuation access support activities where feasible.
- Gather further information on how Employer purchased flights and visas were reimbursed to better understand how this was managed by Employers.