

Settlement Practice Guide:

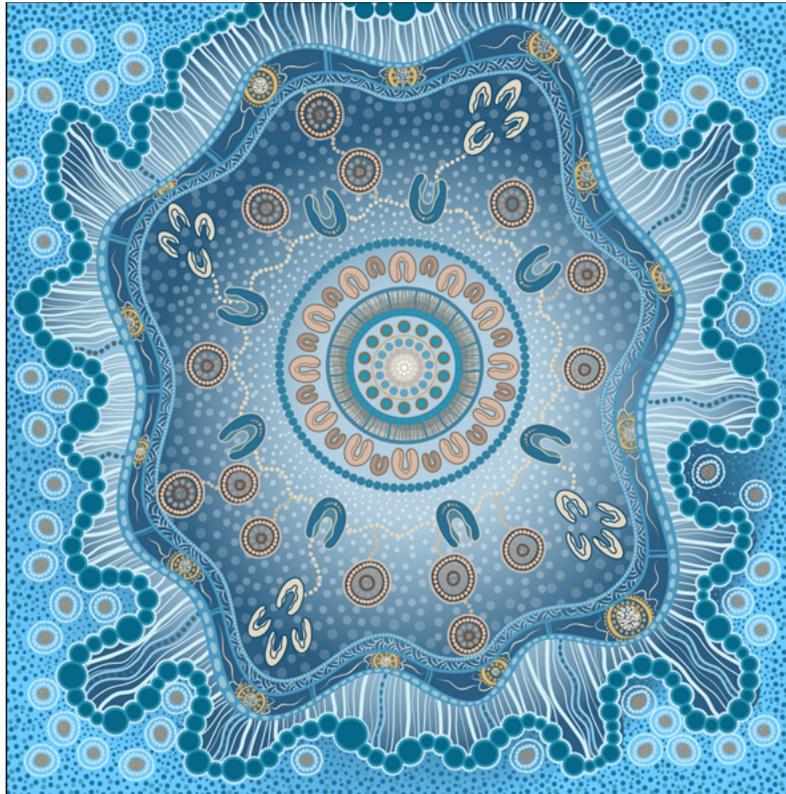
Supporting Clients with Rental Tenancy Issues

January 2026

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Acknowledgments



Acknowledgement of Country

The Social Policy Group acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the First Peoples and the Traditional Custodians and owners of the lands on which we live and work across Australia.

We acknowledge the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people and the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians and Owners of the land on which our offices are situated.

We extend our respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout Australia, past and present. We recognise First Nations' ongoing resilience, strength, and stewardship of the land and commit ourselves to ongoing efforts of reconciliation, understanding, and collaboration.

By Eddie Longford
Indigenous Contemporary Artist, ACT

From the artist: The design tells the story of The Social Policy Group, how it works to link diverse voices and communities with government, while also representing its values of connection and collaboration.

At the centre, a circle represents government, surrounded by u-shapes for people. The Social Policy Group, facing outward, acts as the bridge and protector, connecting communities to policy. The outer u-shapes represent the voices The Social Policy Group works with, linked by a connection line.

The Brindabella Mountains, Murrumbidgee River, and sky form the outer layers, symbolising connection to country, with Mother Earth as the deism protecting and embracing the organisation.

Overview

“In providing settlement services, housing is one of the issues that we see most.”

Settlement Practitioner,
SETSCoP Housing Subgroup Meeting,
August 2025

Stable, safe and affordable housing sits at the heart of successful settlement. For many newly arrived refugees and migrants, navigating Australia’s rental system is unfamiliar, complex and often stressful. Most settlement clients are tenants in private or community housing systems, where small problems can quickly escalate.

This practice guide has been developed by The Social Policy Group (SPG), a national settlement peak body, alongside the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support Community of Practice (SETSCoP). The SETSCoP brings together organisations funded under the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program to share practice, identify challenges and

improve outcomes for refugees and vulnerable migrants. The SETSCoP convenes across ten thematic subgroups, focusing on different policy and practice domains of settlement. This guide has been developed with the expertise and experiences of the SETSCoP Housing Subgroup.

This guide provides settlement practitioners with practical, rights-based steps to support clients experiencing tenancy challenges. It focuses on problem-solving, evidence-gathering and constructive engagement with landlords, real estate agents, and tenancy services.

Housing challenges are among the most common and distressing issues faced by newly arrived communities. Settlement practitioners often hear stories like the following composite example, from clients struggling to secure or maintain safe, affordable homes:

“Our heater turns on, but the air coming out is just warm, no matter what temperature we set it at. I’ve tried to call the real estate agent. They said we must have broken it, so we have to get it fixed. I called the landlord, and they said to call the real estate agent. And now, the real estate agent sent a letter, which says they are going to raise the rent! For a freezing place! I’m thinking we just leave, if we can find anywhere else to live...”

This guide outlines the following practical steps:



1.
An overview of common challenges in securing tenancies for newly arrived communities



2.
A step-by-step approach to supporting tenants, with settlement-specific practice notes



3.
Communication, evidence-gathering and escalation strategies



4.
State and Territory tenant advice services, plus resources for further guidance

Challenges in Securing Tenancies for Newly Arrived Communities

Newly arrived refugees and migrants face a set of systemic barriers that make securing and sustaining suitable rental housing particularly challenging. Many enter the rental market without an established rental history, references or local guarantors, reducing their competitiveness in a tight housing environment. Larger families face further disadvantage, as landlords may prefer smaller households, and the limited availability of suitable multi-bedroom properties.

Conditions in Australia's rental market mean that many clients pay more than half their household income on rent, creating significant financial stress and increasing vulnerability to eviction and homelessness.

Refugees and migrants are often forced to settle further from central locations, away from established supports, increasing transportation costs and creating barriers to employment, education, health care, and essential services.

Language barriers add further pressure, particularly where clients receive notices for rent increases, water bills or lease changes only in English, without access to translated information or support. Despite the availability of free interpreting services, real estate agents and property managers often refuse to engage interpreters, instead relying on community members to interpret informally.

These barriers compound to create a higher risk of misunderstandings, missed deadlines and disputes. Supporting clients to access interpreters, request translated information, and understand their rights is critical to helping them navigate the rental system with confidence.

Supporting Clients

Step 1 – Clarify and Document the Issue

Begin by identifying the specific tenancy issue your client is facing. Common issues include:

- Maintenance and repairs
- Condition reports and bonds
- Rent increases or arrears
- Privacy and entry rights
- Communication with landlords or agents
- Vacating or terminating a lease
- Neighbour disputes or complaints (including where they impact tenancy stability)

Practice note: Neighbour disputes

Neighbour disputes may endanger clients' tenancy if complaints are reported. Advise your clients to calmly record incidents, maintain factual communication, and contact tenancy services early if their tenancy is at risk.

As a settlement practitioner, you are not able to provide legal advice, but you can help clients find accurate information and appropriate referral pathways. Encourage clients to become familiar with their rights and responsibilities as tenants, and the obligations of landlords and property managers.

You should check the client's rights and responsibilities under the relevant Residential Tenancies Act and minimum housing standards in their state or territory. These regulatory frameworks outline key issues such as notice periods, repair obligations, rent increases and lease termination procedures ([see Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Residential Tenancies Acts by State and Territory

State / Territory	Name of tenancy legislation (or equivalent)
New South Wales (NSW)	Residential Tenancies Act 2010
Victoria (VIC)	Residential Tenancies Act 1997
Queensland (QLD)	Residential Tenancies and Rooming Accommodation Act 2008
Western Australia (WA)	Residential Tenancies Act 1987
South Australia (SA)	Residential Tenancies Act 1995
Tasmania (TAS)	Residential Tenancy Act 1997
Australian Capital Territory (ACT)	Residential Tenancies Act 1997 (ACT)
Northern Territory (NT)	Residential Tenancies Act 1999

Step 2 – Build an Evidence Trail

Encourage clients to start a “paper trail” as soon as an issue arises. Written records, especially emails, provide clear evidence of the problem, the actions taken, and proof that the landlord or agent has been notified. You can model these practices with clients and explain why they matter.

Experienced settlement practitioners recommend supporting clients to:

- Send all tenancy requests in writing, using email as the default.

Practice note: Portals and digital barriers

Many property managers use online portals for maintenance and tenancy communications. Encourage clients to submit requests via these portals and keep records such as screenshots, confirmation emails, reference numbers, and dates.

For clients with limited digital skills, offer brief coaching on setting up logins, saving passwords, and storing important documents together. This helps clients act independently and limits reliance on verbal communication.

- Send up to three follow-up emails, spaced one to two weeks apart, clearly stating that formal action may be taken if there is no reasonable response after the third attempt.

- Keep copies of all emails and letters in one place. Three separate written attempts usually create a strong evidence base if the matter proceeds to a tribunal.
- When communicating via phone, note the date, time, the real estate agency staff member's name and position, and any reference number provided, then follow up with an email summarising what was discussed. Where an agency does not provide email contact, case notes, and reference numbers (including repair reference numbers) become especially important forms of evidence.
- Keep dated photos and videos of the property's condition, especially when they first move in and when repairs are needed.

If there is still no reasonable response after repeated attempts, you can help clients consider escalation options, such as lodging a formal complaint with the real estate agency, contacting the relevant government housing body or seeking advice from a tenant support service.

Practitioners often suggest phrases such as: *"We would like to resolve this amicably, but if I don't hear from you by [date], I will apply to the Tribunal."*

Early and polite written engagement often leads to faster resolution and preserves positive relationships between tenants and property managers.

"Emails always work. Evidence always works. When there is a pattern of evidence, it shows that you are prepared."

Settlement Practitioner, Victoria



Practice note: Using interpreters and translated information

In Australia, tenancy legislation does not generally impose a legal obligation on landlords or real estate agents to provide translated written documents outside tribunal or court proceedings. However, tenants may request translated information, and both tenants and real estate agents can use accredited interpreters in tenancy-related communication.

The Australian Government's Free Interpreting Service (TIS National) provides free verbal interpreting services for registered real estate agencies and tenants. While not legally mandated in most tenancy interactions, the use of interpreters is considered best practice and supports clear communication, procedural fairness, and risk reduction for all parties.

It can be beneficial to support your clients to meet real estate agents in-person to discuss tenancy documents using an accredited interpreter, alongside written translations. This approach can help ensure understanding of key obligations, deadlines, and options, while reducing misunderstandings that may later escalate into disputes.

While access to interpreters in tenancy matters is not always a legal right outside formal proceedings, refusal to engage an interpreter may be relevant if a matter later escalates to a tenancy authority or tribunal, particularly where language barriers have contributed to misunderstanding or disadvantage.

Step 3 – Escalation to Formal Resolution

Support letters from settlement organisations can also assist clients when responding to termination notices, rent increase disputes or applications for housing. These letters can provide important context for the landlord or agent and can sometimes prevent unnecessary escalation.

If the issue remains unresolved, assist your client in escalating the matter through the appropriate channels:

- Consumer Affairs or the relevant tenancy body: For assessment or early intervention
- Ombudsman or regulatory bodies: To lodge a complaint if rights aren't respected
- Civil and Administrative Tribunal: For urgent or complex cases requiring a legal decision

Settlement practitioners can make a referral to their local Tenants Association at this step, or usually even earlier ([see Step 1](#)).

One practitioner described a practical shortcut that often achieves results quickly:

“If a tenancy issue isn't being resolved, I contact the Ombudsman and the Department of Customer Service. There will be respective ones in each State and Territory. You give the tenant's address, what the issue is and who the real estate agent is, then the authorities will send a letter of demand. Your name doesn't have to be attached to it.

I've built a relationship with the Ombudsman and Department. I tell them who I am, that I have my client with me, give them the details, then they say: “We'll take care of it.”

This is my shortcut, there are no others. Especially for people who are vulnerable, or those who might be intimidated to speak with authorities or with government.”

Settlement Practitioner, New South Wales



Practice note: The challenges of escalations

When supporting clients to escalate matters to tenancy tribunals, help them prepare for potential challenges. Interpreters may not always be available, and outcomes will not always favour tenants, even where there are significant housing issues. It is important to manage expectations about dispute resolution.

Balance strong advocacy for clients' rights with efforts to maintain constructive relationships with real estate agents and property managers. Many disputes are initially framed as the tenant's fault, so a calm, evidence-based approach is critical.

Practice note: Managing expectations about social housing

Many clients experiencing tenancy issues consider leaving a tenancy as a solution. Where clients are also waiting for social housing, settlement practitioners can support them to understand likely waiting periods, the risks of leaving before alternative housing is secured, and the repercussions of breaking a lease including ongoing costs, loss of bond, and potential impacts on future letting.

Where appropriate, help clients weigh options such as remaining in place while building an evidence trail and escalating repairs, negotiating reasonable adjustments with the agent, and seeking early advice from a tenancy service. This can reduce unnecessary exits from housing that may increase the risk of homelessness.

Before Issues Arise: Tenants' Rights and Responsibilities

Early, simple information can prevent many tenancy disputes. Settlement practitioners can help clients to understand their rights and responsibilities before problems arise through orientation, English classes, and community workshops. These engagements can be tailored to help build confidence to request repairs, how to complete condition reports, and evidence keeping.

The Benefits of Early Education

Settlement practitioners note that many newly arrived clients hesitate to request repairs from their real estate agents or landlord because they are unsure what is reasonable to ask:

“Understanding of rights and responsibilities, in particular, rights. Being hesitant to seek the actions that they need from the landlords on repairs to the property, that they shouldn’t have to deal with themselves because it should be the landlord’s responsibility.”

Clear information early on helps clients recognise when the landlord is responsible for repairs and how to ask appropriately. It also normalises using written communication to keep a record.

Where to Deliver Housing Information

Settlement practitioners noted that partnerships with local education providers such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) are effective channels to deliver basic housing education sessions for new arrivals. Integrating short modules or guest sessions into English language or settlement classes helps clients understand tenancy processes, repairs, and where to seek support.

In addition to classroom-based learning, housing information can also be shared through community centres, faith-based organisations, and settlement orientation sessions, where participants may feel more comfortable asking questions in their first language. Where confusion persists, some practitioners have organised community forums to clarify processes and address common tenancy concerns.

For older clients, consider tailored sessions that also cover age-specific pathways and eligibility requirements (for example, seniors housing options and what this may mean for carers or family members living with them).

Who to Contact: Property Faults vs. Supply Outages

As a rule of thumb, contact the landlord/agent for faults with the property itself (repairs the landlord is usually responsible for) and contact the utility provider for network or supply outages. Always keep written records and confirm local requirements under the *Residential Tenancies Act* in your jurisdiction ([see Table 1](#)).

Further tips:

- **Property faults and urgent repairs:** If the problem is with the property (e.g. burst pipes, no hot water, faulty wiring), tenants should contact the landlord or real estate agent immediately. These are typically urgent repairs that the landlord must arrange within the required timeframes.
- **Network/supply issues:** If the issue is a wider supply outage (e.g. street-wide power or water outage), tenants should contact the utility company directly.
- **If unsure:** Notify the agent in writing (email or portal) and keep records (photos, dates, reference numbers).
- **If there is a tenancy portal:** Log the issue through the portal and keep a screenshot or reference number, then follow up by email if available.
- **Safety first:** If there is a risk to life or property (e.g. electrical hazard, gas leak, fire), call emergency services first, then notify the agent.

Evidence Before Crisis

“It is good practice for settlement workers to include reminders to clients for proactive steps to take at the time a rental agreement is about to be signed. For example, to complete the condition report, take photos of existing wear and tear, and damage to the property.”

– Settlement Practitioner, Victoria



As one provider noted, clients unfamiliar with rental processes may not realise that these early steps protect them from unfair claims at the end of a lease. Encouraging clients to store photos securely (for example, using phone backups or cloud storage) ensures they retain evidence even if devices are lost or replaced.

Building Good Relationships with Real Estate Agents

Strong, respectful relationships with agents and property managers can be the difference between a client being overlooked and a client getting housed. While your role as settlement practitioners is to uphold tenant rights and ensure procedural fairness, you may also benefit from investing in education, rapport, and clear expectations with local agencies.

The reflections below show what practitioners have noticed is working on the ground, and where practice needs work:



“Our team has been connecting with real estate agents and doing really good work with agents for many years now. It makes the agents easier to deal with, so now they are very quick and responsive. It also helps get clients into housing. When people move and don't have a rental history, we help them as a referee.”

– Settlement Practitioner, Victoria

“Our agency has worked really hard on developing positive relationships with property managers. Even though they are constantly breaking laws. Even though they have the funding to utilise interpreters but are failing to do so. By educating property managers about the experiences and needs of refugees and migrants, we have the best chance of getting them on board.”

Settlement Practitioner, New South Wales



What Good Practice Looks Like

Map and prioritise	Research the top ten agencies in your local area and set a quarterly check-in with each one.
Start with shared goals	Frame conversations around what everyone wants: stable tenancies, timely repairs and fewer disputes.
Work together with local services	Partner with community organisations to run workshops on tenancy rights and responsibilities. This builds clients' confidence to manage issues themselves.
Normalise using interpreters	Remind real estate agencies they can use the Free Interpreting Service (TIS National) and encourage them to register. It is free and helps create clear two-way communication, while supporting client autonomy.
Explain the context	Briefly explain why some clients may not have a rental history and how perceived risk can be reduced. For example, through additional references, support letters or simple budgeting support.
Create a reference pack for agents	Provide a one-page handout with key tenancy rights and responsibilities, how to book TIS National, who to contact at your service, and what your service can and cannot do.
Close the loop	After a successful placement or resolved repair issue, thank the agent, highlight what worked well and note any systemic barriers you are seeing.

Relationship-Building Activities

Briefings or lunch-and-learns with agencies on working with tenants from refugee and migrants backgrounds.

Reference clinics to help clients prepare strong rental applications (ID documents, references, affordability summaries), then invite local agents to give feedback.

Facilitated meet-and-greets in trusted spaces (church halls, mosques, temples, community centres, local parks, etc.) to demystify expectations on both sides.

When Practice Falls Short

If a real estate agent refuses to use interpreters, ignores repair obligations or behaves in a discriminatory way, you can:

Record what happened	Note dates and times, and keep copies of emails, letters, screenshots and photos.
Use support and escalation pathways	Contact the relevant Tenants' Advice Service or follow the state or territory tribunal pathways (see Table 1 and Table 2).
Empower the client to assert their rights	Help the client put their concerns in writing and, where possible, represent or accompany them to dispute resolution processes.
Feed issues back into your local work with agencies	Use these examples in your education and engagement with local agents so recurring problems can be addressed early.



Housing Support Practice Considerations

Promote client agency	Wherever possible, equip clients to act for themselves with clear information, evidence and confidence.
Respond to vulnerability	Clients in unsafe or unsuitable housing (no heating, mould, serious repairs, etc.) may not recognise, know of, or assert their rights. They often need stronger advocacy, including you liaising directly with agencies.
Be cautious with informal co-tenancy arrangements	Some clients may consider sharing housing with non-family members or renting a room as an affordability strategy. Where this arises, encourage early advice from tenancy services to understand rights, responsibilities, and safety considerations, and to avoid arrangements that may increase vulnerabilities, exposure to risks or housing instability.
Address power imbalances	Many clients feel intimidated by agents, landlords or government bodies. They may need additional encouragement or support to speak up.
Support digital skills	Help clients build basic digital skills for housing, such as searching online, completing applications, checking emails and portals.
Build relationships and credibility	Develop contacts with Consumer Affairs, tenancy regulators and ombudsman offices. Knowing who to call can speed up resolutions and strengthen your advocacy.

Tenancy Advice Services

Each state and territory has a free tenancy advice service. The organisations listed in the table below can be contacted for legal assistance with tenancy issues. It is usually best to phone these services, as many cannot provide legal advice by email.

Many tenancy services also offer training on tenants' rights and dispute processes, including sessions tailored for settlement staff and/or directly for clients. These are often free for community services and not-for-profits and can be delivered online or in person.

Table 2. Tenancy Advice Services

State / Territory	Service	Phone	Email	Website
Australian Capital Territory	Tenancy Advice Service ACT	1300 402 512	tas@legalaidact.org.au	https://www.legalaidact.org.au/tasact
New South Wales	Tenants' Union of NSW	(02) 8117 3700	contact@tenantsunion.org.au	https://www.tenants.org.au/
Northern Territory	NT Tenants' Advice Service (Darwin Community Legal Service)	1800 812 953	info@dcls.org.au	https://www.dcls.org.au/tenants-advice
Queensland	Tenants Queensland - QSTARS	1300 744 263	mail@tenantsqld.org.au	https://tenantsqld.org.au/ https://qstars.org.au/
South Australia	RentRight SA	1800 060 462	Fill out the following form to contact the RentRight SA team: https://www.syc.net.au/services/housing-homelessness-support/rentright-sa#contact-us	https://www.syc.net.au/services/housing-homelessness-support/rentright-sa
Tasmania	Tenants' Union of Tasmania	(03) 6223 2641 1300 652 641	info@tenantstas.org.au	https://tutas.org.au/

Table 2. Tenancy Advice Services (cont.)

Victoria	Tenants Victoria	(03) 9416 2577	Tenants Victoria does not provide an email address for rental support	https://tenantsvic.org.au/contact-us/
Western Australia	Circle Green Community Legal (formerly Tenancy WA)	(08) 6148 3636 (08) 9221 0088	For tenancy matters, please fill out the following form: https://circlegreen.org.au/get-help-tenancy/	https://circlegreen.org.au/tenancy/



Further Resources

Resource	Focus / Use	Link
TIS National - Free Interpreting Service for Real Estate Agencies	Information for settlement workers and tenants to support advocacy with real estate agencies about accessing free verbal interpreting services for tenancy communication.	https://www.tisnational.gov.au/Our-services/Free-Interpreting-Service/Eligible-groups/Real-estate-agencies
Tenants Victoria: Renters' Rights Presentation to SETSCoP (June 2025)	Slides from a multicultural community renters' session, tailored to SETSCoP providers (good for staff training and client education).	https://setscop.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Multicultural-Community-Renters-Session-FINAL-Read-Only.pdf
Tenants Victoria	Plain-English guides on repairs, bonds, rent increases, evictions and other key tenancy issues.	https://tenantsvic.org.au/
Consumer Affairs Victoria	Information on minimum rental standards, rent assessments, complaints processes, and landlord/agent obligations.	https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au
Housing for the Aged Action Group	Specialist advocacy, information, and support for older (generally aged 50 years and over+), including advice on tenancy rights, preventing eviction, navigating housing options, and understanding eligibility for seniors-specific housing pathways.	https://www.oldertenants.org.au/
Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT)	Application forms, hearing information and guidance on tribunal processes for tenancy disputes.	https://www.vcat.vic.gov.au
Family Violence Protection Tenancy Kit: Guide to Renter's Rights protections (VIC)	This kit is designed for support workers and advocates who assist people affected by family violence or personal violence. The purpose of the kit is to help people in rental housing to know their rights, have a secure home and limit any financial loss.	https://tenantsvic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Family_violence_protection-tenancy_kit.pdf

Further Resources (cont.)

Circle Green – Tenancy resources (WA)	Fact sheets and resources on tenancy rights and dispute options in Western Australia.	https://circlegreen.org.au/resources/tenancy/
Blurred Borders tenancy fact sheets (WA and cross-border)	Clear fact sheets on tenancy issues in WA and cross-border contexts, useful for clients moving between jurisdictions.	https://blurredborders.legalaid.wa.gov.au/packs/Tenancy/fact-sheets
Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) Webinar on Housing	This webinar looked at international examples of accommodation solutions and reflected on how these models could help address accommodation challenges in Australia.	https://scoa.org.au/webinars/settlement-in-practice-housing-accommodation-solutions/

Contributors

1. Aguer, Tenants Victoria, VIC
2. Amina, MiCare, VIC
3. Arad, CatholicCare, VIC
4. Bayda, Migrant Resource Centre North West Region, VIC
5. Brendan, Centacare FNQ, QLD
6. Carmen, Assyrian Resource Centre / Assyrian Australian Association, NSW
7. Chris, SSI, QLD
8. Christian, Multicultural Australia, QLD
9. Daisy, Multicultural Australia, QLD
10. Daniel, MIC East Melbourne, VIC
11. Dhondup, LocalKind Northern Beaches, NSW
12. Evie, Many Coloured Sky, VIC
13. Fadi, Antiochian Orthodox Church Community, NSW
14. Fana, Communicare, WA
15. Gula, Australian Women of Victoria (AWOV), VIC
16. Hafiz, Victoria Afghan Association Network, VIC
17. Hiba, Whittlesea Community Connections, VIC
18. Husnia, Victoria Afghan Association Network, VIC
19. Ian, Many Coloured Sky, VIC
20. Inna, Advance Diversity Services, NSW
21. Ivy, Australian Women of Victoria (AWOV), VIC
22. Jacinta, Wyndham CEC, VIC
23. Jane, SSI, QLD
24. Jessica, Migrant Resource Centre, TAS
25. Jesse, Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre, VIC
26. Joy, Lebanese Muslim Association, NSW
27. Katrina, SSI, QLD
28. Kaveh, Multilink Community Services, QLD
29. Khai, MiCare, VIC
30. Khaled, Connecting Community Services, NSW
31. Khadija, MWASA, SA
32. Kholud, AMWCHR, VIC
33. Kim, Jesuit Social Services, VIC
34. Ko Yeh, Wyndham CEC, VIC
35. Kunnika, SMECC, VIC
36. Lian, MiCare, VIC
37. Lida, South East Community Links, VIC
38. Linda, Arabic Welfare, VIC
39. Mariam, Arabic Welfare, VIC
40. Maureen, AWVRB, VIC
41. Mehrangiz, Migrant Resource Centre, TAS
42. Melissa, SSI, QLD
43. Mia, Multicultural Australia, QLD
44. Michael, Sydney MCS, NSW
45. Mohsin, Uniting VIC & TAS
46. Monica, Melkite Charitable Foundation, NSW
47. Mu Lay, MercyCare, WA
48. Najwa, Melkite Charitable Foundation, NSW
49. Nasima, AWOV, VIC
50. Nicole, CCSSCI, VIC
51. Poni, MiCare, VIC
52. Rain, Sydney MCS, NSW
53. Rallian, Wyndham CEC, VIC
54. Ranju, Sydney MCS, NSW
55. Raissa, Communicare, WA
56. Ruth, 54 Reasons, QLD
57. Saghar, Townsville Multicultural Support Group, QLD
58. Sandra, Chaldean League of NSW, NSW
59. Sanaz, Spectrum, VIC
60. Sarah, Uniting Communities, SA
61. Sazrina, Cultura, VIC
62. Senthya, Multicultural Australia, QLD
63. Shahnaz, Afghan Women's Association Victoria, VIC
64. Simone, MiCare, VIC
65. Siobhan, Centacare FNQ, QLD
66. Skye, North Coast Settlement Service, NSW
67. Soe, South East Community Links, VIC
68. Steph, LCHS, VIC
69. Sunday, organisation and location unknown
70. Tharindi, SSI, QLD
71. Tra, Townsville MSG, QLD
72. Vincent, Chinese Community Social Services Centre Inc, VIC
73. Winifred, SSI, QLD
74. Yalda, Wyndham CEC, VIC
75. Ye Htoo, CatholicCare, VIC
76. Zaman, CatholicCare, VIC

About Us



SETSCoP

The Settlement Engagement and Transition Support Community of Practice (SETSCoP) is a national collaboration of organisations delivering the Australian Government's Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program. Facilitated by The Social Policy Group (SPG), SETSCoP brings together more than 102 settlement service providers from across Australia to share best practice, strengthen professional capability, and contribute to the ongoing development of settlement policy and service delivery.

SETSCoP provides structured mechanisms for collaboration and learning, including national and state-based meetings, thematic subgroups, professional development events, and CEO forums. Through these forums, SETS providers work together to address local, state and national issues affecting refugees and migrants, and to co-design practical, sector-led outcomes that support more effective and responsive settlement systems.

By fostering shared learning, innovation, and collaboration, SETSCoP supports improved outcomes for people supported through the SETS program and contributes to a stronger, more connected settlement sector and wider community.



The Social Policy Group

The Social Policy Group (SPG) works to ensure Australia's policies and systems better serve diverse communities. As a trusted partner of government, community leaders and service providers, and the peak body for settlement and multicultural health, SPG is recognised for leadership across gender equality, access to justice, economic analysis and community sector capacity building.

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Contact Us

T: (+61) 2 6162 0361

E: info@socialpolicy.org.au

Canberra: 46 Jardine St, Kingston ACT 2604

Melbourne: 408 Fitzroy Street, Fitzroy VIC 3065



SETTLEMENT
PEAK BODY

