

THINK TANK REPORT

SOUTHERN MELBOURNE AREA REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

Strategic Framework for Coordinated
Settlement Support

August 2026



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Many Journey's, One Community - Merindah Gunya Art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The City of Casey proudly acknowledges the traditional owners, Casey's Aboriginal communities and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past, present and future.

We acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia's first peoples and as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work and live.

COMMITMENT TO RECONCILIATION

The City of Casey is committed to reconciliation and to strengthening respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Building on the foundations established through this work to date, we are embedding reconciliation across our systems, leadership and service delivery.

Guided by the Casey Aboriginal Gathering Place, we will continue to support cultural connection, build community capacity and work in partnership to achieve lasting, positive outcomes.

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

The City of Casey is a welcoming and inclusive community, we celebrate all people with their many different stories and experiences.

We believe a strong community is built on respect, belonging and shared responsibility for each other. We are committed to ensuring everyone in Casey feels valued, supported, and able to fully participate in community life.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Southern Melbourne Area (SMA) is one of Victoria's most culturally diverse regions and a primary settlement destination for humanitarian arrivals. Comprising the City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey, and Cardinia Shire, the region is home to approximately 641,780 people, representing 10% of Victoria's population. Within this region, roughly 44.9% of residents were born overseas while 63.4% have both parents born overseas.^{1, 2}

In December 2023, the Southern Melbourne Area Refugee Settlement Think Tank was established in response to a critical need for coordinated, place-based settlement support. Over 30 settlement support networks operated across the region, yet consultation undertaken by members of the Think Tank revealed that services frequently operated in isolation. This fragmentation resulted in service gaps, duplication of effort, and suboptimal outcomes for humanitarian arrivals who require seamless, culturally appropriate support as they navigate complex settlement processes.

The cost of inaction is significant. Poor coordination and inadequate support for humanitarian settlement programs (HSP) and newly arrived communities contributes to poor health outcomes, unemployment, family violence, and low school retention, all of which place greater long-term demand on government services. Investing in coordinated, place-based settlement support is not only a moral imperative but a cost-effective approach to building community wellbeing and reducing downstream service costs.

Key Findings

The Think Tank's extensive stakeholder consultation process identified systemic challenges across all stages of the settlement journey. New arrivals face barriers in accessing affordable housing, securing meaningful employment, navigating health and disability support systems, and accessing culturally appropriate services. These challenges are compounded by the cessation of Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) funding after six to eighteen months, despite ongoing complex needs that require sustained support.

Settlement workers report insufficient coordination mechanisms between organisations, limited cultural competency within mainstream services, and inadequate data collection systems that hinder evidence-based service design. The increasing complexity of humanitarian arrivals, including adults and children with disabilities, specialised health requirements, and trauma requiring long-term therapeutic intervention, necessitates enhanced coordination and specialised support pathways.³

Strategic Response

This report proposes a three-tiered implementation framework designed to guide regional efforts through immediate actions (6 months), medium-term goals (6-18 months), and long-term strategic priorities (18+ months). A central component of this proposal is the establishment of a Strategic Settlement Planning Governance Committee, which would serve as the primary coordinating platform for cross-cultural service delivery aligned with National Settlement Outcome Standards.⁴

To ensure regional accountability and avoid conflicts of interest arising from differing local government priorities, it is recommended that this Committee be led by a neutral, independent backbone organisation specifically funded for this coordination role.

Priority actions for consideration include establishing standardised referral protocols, developing shared resource databases, and implementing joint professional development programs. Furthermore, there is an opportunity to create integrated employment pathways facilitated through the *Settlement Leading Partner's Network* that recognise international qualifications and provide essential workplace cultural preparation.⁵

The Southern Melbourne Area has the potential to develop a pioneering model for place-based humanitarian settlement support, characterised by sustainable funding arrangements, coordination mechanisms and culturally responsive services that genuinely meet the diverse needs of all arrivals settling in the region.

The link between effective settlement support and broader social cohesion outcomes is well established. *The Connections that Matter: Inter-cultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion Initiative*⁶ in the South East of Melbourne (2026) highlights that good settlement outcomes lead to good social cohesion outcomes. The report specifically notes the ongoing challenges of social marginalisation and isolation among newly arrived communities, compounded by intersectional factors including gender, class, age, health and disability. This provides important context for the recommendations in this report and reinforces the case for coordinated place-based settlement support as a foundation for community wellbeing.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), (2021) *Census of Population and Housing, LGA Data Profiles*.

² Department of Home Affairs, *Settlement Reporting Facility* (2021-2024).

³ Refugee Council of Australia (2023), *Settlement Services in Australia: Current Challenges and Future Direction*.

⁴ Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA), (2020) *National Settlement Outcome Standards*.

⁵ Scanlon Foundation, (2024/25) *Mapping Social Cohesion Report*.

⁶ *Connections that Matter: Inter-cultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion*.

1. PURPOSE

This report documents the findings and recommendations of the Southern Melbourne Area Refugee Settlement Think Tank, a collaborative initiative bringing together government agencies and humanitarian settlement service providers.

This report serves multiple purposes, it:

- Identifies current systemic challenges facing humanitarian arrivals throughout their settlement journey in the Southern Melbourne Area.
 - Presents evidence-based strategic priorities for improving coordinated settlement support across the three municipalities of City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey, and Cardinia Shire.
 - Establishes a framework for implementing place-based, culturally responsive settlement services aligned with National Settlement Outcome Standards, and finally
- Provides actionable recommendations grounded in extensive stakeholder consultation and the lived experiences of humanitarian arrivals.⁷

The report is intended for use by settlement service providers, government agencies, community organisations, mainstream service providers, and policy makers involved in humanitarian settlement planning and service delivery.

2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

2.1 Regional Profile

Southern Melbourne Area encompasses three municipalities in Melbourne’s southeast, collectively representing one of Victoria’s most significant humanitarian settlement regions. As of the 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census, the area is home to an estimated 641,780 people, constituting approximately 10% of Victoria’s total population. (Table 1)

Table 1

Municipality	Total Population (2021)	Born Overseas (%)	Both Parents Born Overseas (%)
City of Greater Dandenong	158,347	63.4%	77.9%
City of Casey	365,239	42.1%	64.3%
Cardinia Shire	118,194	28.5%	41.4%
Total SMA	641,780	10% of Victoria’s population	

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census of Population and Housing

⁷ Settlement Leading Partners Network, (2023) Settlement Processes and Services Guide Version-3.0 May-2025.

2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

2.2 Humanitarian Settlement Patterns

Southern Melbourne Area serves as a major settlement destination for humanitarian entrants from multiple regions globally.⁸ Principal source countries include Middle Eastern nations such as Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey; Asian countries including Myanmar, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Laos; and African nations including Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan.⁹ This diversity creates both opportunities for vibrant multicultural communities and challenges for service coordination across multiple cultural, linguistic, and religious contexts.¹⁰ (Table 2)

Table 2

Municipality	Born in Afghanistan	Afghan Ancestry	Significance
City of Casey	14,679	23,450	Victoria's largest Afghan community
City of Greater Dandenong	4,824	7,268	Second-largest Afghan community in Victoria
Cardinia Shire	362	773	Significant relative to total population

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census of Population and Housing

2.3 Establishment of the Think Tank

In 2023, the Southern Melbourne Area Refugee Settlement Think Tank was established to address a critical gap in regional coordination, with the Community Partnerships team, Southern Melbourne Area, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) playing a pivotal role in convening the initial group and providing the foundational support that enabled the Think Tank to take shape. While the region benefits from dedicated service providers and multiple established networks, stakeholder consultation revealed that organisations frequently operate in isolation from one another. The cessation of the Southeast Regional Settlement Planning Committee, which previously served as the primary coordinating mechanism for the region, further illustrates the critical gap created by the absence of a resourced, independent coordination position. The Committee’s operations ceased due to a lack of dedicated funding and staffing to sustain its function.

The Think Tank brought together government agencies and local humanitarian settlement services to identify opportunities for strategic, place-based coordination. The initiative recognises that effective settlement support requires seamless collaboration across multiple service domains, including housing, employment, health, education, and social connection.

⁸ ABS, (2021) Census, LGA Data.

⁹ Department of Home Affairs, (2021-2024) Settlement Reporting Facility.

¹⁰ Settlement Leading Partners Network, (May 2025) Settlement Processes and Services Guide.

¹¹ Department of Home Affairs, Australia’s Migration Trends 2022–23, p. 11. (The total includes the core 13,750 places plus 4,125 additional places specifically for Afghan nationals).

¹² Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), 2022-23 Federal Budget Analysis: What it means for Refugees.

¹³ National Humanitarian Program 2022-23.

¹⁴ Department of Home Affairs, Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP).

¹⁵ Settlement Services International (SSI), Humanitarian Settlement Program: Service Delivery Scope.

¹⁶ Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), (2023) Submission to the Department of Home Affairs on Australia’s Migration Health Requirement.

¹⁷ Department of Social Services (DSS), (August 2024) Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS), DEX Program Guidelines.

2.4 National Humanitarian Program Context

The 2022-23 Humanitarian Program delivered 17,875 places nationally¹¹, representing the first time the program was fully delivered since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2018-19.¹² A significant proportion of these arrivals settled in the Southern Melbourne Area, reflecting the region’s established settlement infrastructure and existing cultural communities that provide natural support networks for new arrivals.¹³

The Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) provides comprehensive initial support for a period of six to eighteen months.¹⁴ Services include airport reception, temporary accommodation assistance, referrals to mainstream services, facilitation of community connections, English language instruction, employment pathway support, and orientation to Australian systems and social norms.¹⁵ However, stakeholder consultation consistently identified that settlement needs extend well beyond this initial period, particularly for arrivals with complex needs including disabilities, chronic health conditions, and trauma requiring sustained therapeutic intervention.¹⁶ Following the initial HSP period, clients are often referred to Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) providers to receive additional settlement support.¹⁷

2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

2.5 Increasing Complexity of Arrivals

Service providers across Southern Melbourne Area report increasing numbers of humanitarian arrivals with complex support needs. These include adults and children with physical and intellectual disabilities requiring specialised support and navigation of complex systems such as the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Many arrivals present with health conditions requiring ongoing specialised medical care, including chronic diseases and conditions requiring regular monitoring and treatment.¹⁸ Trauma resulting from conflict, persecution, and prolonged displacement requires long-term therapeutic support delivered in culturally appropriate frameworks. All these needs must be met through services that demonstrate cultural competency across multiple distinct communities, each with unique cultural practices, religious requirements, family structures, and communication preferences.¹⁹ To bridge these gaps, the Department of Health Multicultural Health Action Plan 2023–27 has prioritised the embedding of cultural safety within mainstream services to address the health inequalities faced by these cohorts.²⁰

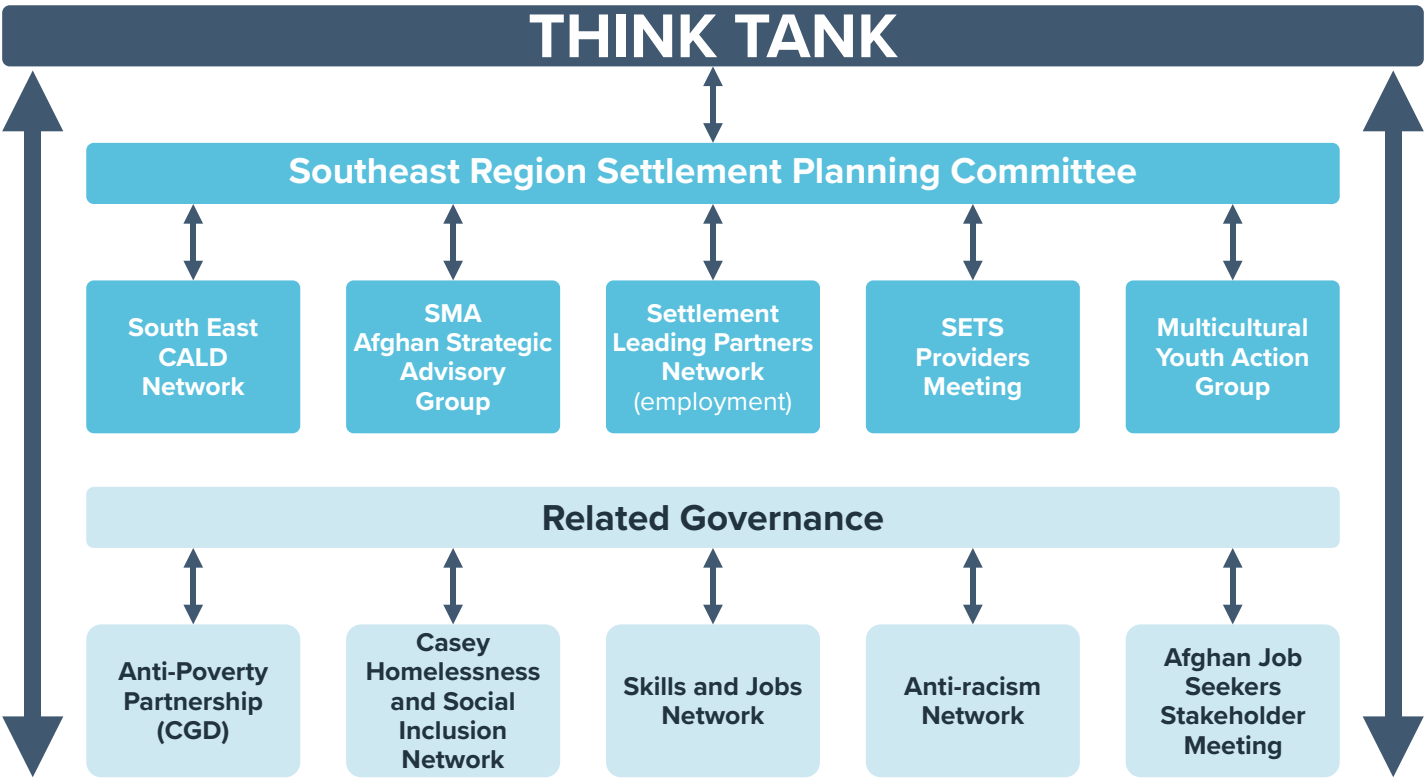
2.6 Stakeholder Consultation Network

The Think Tank’s development involved extensive consultation across more than 35 established networks and committees operating within Southern Melbourne Area. This comprehensive engagement ensured that the Think Tank’s findings and recommendations reflect diverse perspectives across the full spectrum of settlement service delivery.

Southern Melbourne Area: Key Stakeholders and Service Areas

The diagram below maps out the governance structures which supported area governance to support regional humanitarian settlement.

The Southeast Regional Planning Committee, led by Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre (SMRC) was identified as being pivotal to drive strategic alignment between key settlement priorities and frontline service delivery ensuring that settlement outcomes are monitored through a place-based lens rather than isolated program outputs.²¹



Southern Melbourne Area – Refugee and Asylum Seeker Governance (2024)

¹⁸ Victorian Refugee Health Network, (April 2026) *Submission: Australia’s Humanitarian Program 2026-27*.

¹⁹ Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV), (2025) *Annual Report 2024-25: Engagement with Migrant and Refugee Communities*.

²⁰ Department of Health (Victoria), *Multicultural Health Action Plan 2023–27: Improving Health Equity*, May 2024 (Updated 2026).

²¹ Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre (SMRC), *Annual Report 2024-25*.

3. METHODOLOGY

The Think Tank Implementation Team developed a structured five-phase approach to ensure comprehensive stakeholder engagement, systematic analysis of existing service delivery models, and evidence-based development of actionable recommendations. This phased methodology enabled progressive refinement of findings and allowed for iterative consultation with stakeholders throughout the process.



Think Tank Five-phase Approach

This phased approach ensured systematic progression from analysis through to implementation, with each phase building on insights generated in previous stages. The methodology prioritised stakeholder voice and lived experience perspectives throughout all phases of development.

Phase 1 Foundation	Desktop Review and Stakeholder Mapping Systematic identification and documentation of existing networks operating within the Southern Melbourne Area. Conducted one-on-one consultations with key stakeholders to understand current challenges, service delivery barriers, and coordination gaps from multiple organisational perspectives.
Phase 2 Analysis	Strategic Planning and Pathway Clarification Systematic clarification of organisational roles, responsibilities, and referral pathways. This included an analysis of service duplication and the identification of gaps in current provision to develop a framework for genuine collaboration rather than competitive service delivery models.
Phase 3 Development	Action-Based Recommendations Development of practical, implementable recommendations addressing identified gaps in settlement processes. This phase focused on identifying service requirements for current and future migration patterns, establishing realistic timelines, and exploring sustainable funding mechanisms to support Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) programs.
Phase 4 Implementation	Network Re-establishment The formal re-establishment of the Southeast Regional Settlement Planning Committee (SERSPC) serves as the primary coordinating mechanism for cross sectoral support. This includes the collaborative development of governance structures, terms of reference, and operational protocols. However, in December 2025, the SMRC and key partners decided to cease the previous committee’s operations to allow for a transition toward a more sustainable model.
Phase 5 Sustainability	Capacity Building and Long-term Sustainability A focused development of the Committee’s capacity to sustainably deliver coordinated support. This includes establishing evaluation frameworks, continuous improvement mechanisms and knowledge sharing systems to ensure the region can adapt to shifting humanitarian needs over the long term.

4. KEY FINDINGS

The Think Tank's consultation process revealed systemic challenges affecting humanitarian settlement across multiple domains. Analysis was structured against the National Settlement Outcome Standards framework²² to ensure comprehensive assessment of the settlement journey and identification of gaps at each critical stage.

4.1 System-Wide Service Coordination Challenges

Despite considerable organisational effort and commitment across the region, the desktop review and stakeholder consultation identified fundamental coordination challenges that undermine settlement outcomes. These systemic issues affect service efficiency, create confusion for humanitarian arrivals navigating multiple touchpoints, and result in suboptimal use of limited resources.

Fragmented Service Delivery

More than 35 networks currently operate across the Southern Melbourne Area, yet coordination between them remains limited. Networks frequently operate independently without systematic information sharing mechanisms, leading to service duplication in some areas and significant gaps in others. Humanitarian arrivals report confusion when navigating multiple organisations without clear guidance on which services address specific needs.

Mainstream Service Isolation

Settlement service providers and mainstream services frequently operate in isolation from one another. Mainstream health, education, housing, and employment services often lack established referral pathways to specialised settlement support. This isolation means that humanitarian arrivals accessing mainstream services may not receive culturally appropriate support or be connected to settlement-specific resources that could address their needs more effectively.

Cultural Competency Gaps

Many mainstream services lack the cultural competency necessary to effectively support diverse refugee communities.²³ This includes insufficient understanding of varying religious practices, diverse family structures, cultural norms around gender roles and communication, trauma-informed practice specific to refugee experiences, and appropriate use of interpreters.²⁴ These gaps can result in miscommunication, inappropriate service responses, and reduced engagement from humanitarian arrivals who do not feel understood or respected.²⁵

Data and Information Sharing Limitations

Organisations operate with limited mechanisms for sharing data, coordinating client support, and collectively tracking settlement outcomes. Privacy considerations, incompatible data systems, and absence of shared protocols prevent effective coordination. The lack of systematic data collection disaggregated by country of origin makes it difficult to identify community-specific needs or design evidence-based service improvements targeting particular populations.

²² Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA), (2020) *National Settlement Outcome Standards*.

²³ Victorian Refugee Health Network, (2023) *Submission to the Multicultural Framework Review*, September.

²⁴ Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), (April 2025) *Policy and Advocacy: Submission on Refugee and Humanitarian Programs*.

²⁵ Multicultural Women's Health Australia (MCWH), (2025/26) *Sustaining Impact: Health, Safety and Leadership for Migrant and Refugee Women*, Budget Submission.

4. KEY FINDINGS

4.2 Settlement Journey Barriers

When stakeholder feedback was analysed against the National Settlement Outcome Standards framework, consistent barriers emerged across all key settlement domains. These barriers compound one another, with challenges in one area often creating or exacerbating difficulties in others.

Information and Orientation

New arrivals from diverse cultural backgrounds report significant difficulty navigating Australia's complex service systems.²⁶ Standard orientation programs often fail to account for varying levels of literacy, different educational backgrounds, and unfamiliarity with concepts fundamental to Australian systems such as insurance, taxation, tenancy rights, and consumer protections.²⁷

Cultural orientation materials frequently lack specificity for particular communities, failing to address unique cultural considerations such as halal dietary requirements, prayer obligations, gender-specific service preferences, or family decision-making structures that differ from Anglo-Australian norms.²⁸

Housing and Accommodation

Humanitarian arrivals face acute barriers accessing affordable, appropriate, and sustainable accommodation. The private rental market presents multiple challenges including discrimination based on visa status or cultural background, lack of rental history in Australia, insufficient understanding of tenancy rights and obligations, and affordability constraints given limited income during initial settlement periods.²⁹

Large families struggle to find suitable accommodation that meets their needs, while single arrivals, particularly women, report concerns about culturally inappropriate or unsafe shared accommodation placements. Families with members who have disabilities face additional challenges securing modified or accessible housing.³⁰

Employment and Economic Participation

Multiple interconnected barriers prevent humanitarian arrivals from securing meaningful employment aligned with their skills and qualifications. The non-recognition of international qualifications represents a significant barrier, particularly for professionally qualified arrivals who find their credentials unrecognised or undervalued in the Australian labour market. Complex and expensive qualification recognition processes create additional obstacles.³¹

Limited understanding of Australian workplace culture, expectations around resume presentation and interview conduct, and the emphasis on local experience disadvantage new arrivals.³² Job readiness programs frequently fail to account for diverse educational backgrounds, varying levels of English proficiency, and cultural differences in workplace communication and hierarchy. Transportation barriers and the cost of driver licensing further limit access to employment opportunities, particularly for roles in industrial areas not well serviced by public transport.^{33, 34}

²⁶ Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA), *Foundations for Settlement: National Settlement Outcome Standards*, 2020 (Updated 2025).

²⁷ Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), *Annual Report 2024-25: Barriers to Successful Settlement in Australia*.

²⁸ Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), (April 2026) *Submission to the Australia's Humanitarian Program 2026-27*.

Australia's Humanitarian Program 2026 - 27.

²⁹ Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), (February 2026) *Submission: 2025-26 Humanitarian Program*.

³⁰ Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), *Annual Report 2025: Housing and Homelessness among Refugee Communities*.

³¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), *Study reveals long-term 'occupational downgrade' of refugee workers*, June 2025.

³² UNSW Business Think, (2025) *Why refugees still face barriers to employment in Australia*.

³³ House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services (2023). *Rebuilding the Employment Services System – Final Report*. Parliament of Australia **FINAL REPORT-Rebuilding the employment services system.**

³⁴ Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), *The relationship between transport and disadvantage in Australia*, 2026 edition.

4. KEY FINDINGS

4.2 Settlement Journey Barriers

Health and Wellbeing

Access to culturally appropriate health services remains significantly limited. Mental health support for trauma-affected refugees is particularly inadequate, with long waiting periods for psychology services, limited availability of multilingual mental health professionals, and insufficient trauma-informed care frameworks that account for refugee-specific experiences of persecution, conflict, and displacement.³⁵

Physical health challenges include difficulty navigating the Medicare system, understanding health insurance options, accessing specialist medical care, and communicating effectively with health providers when professional interpreters are not consistently available. Cultural differences in understanding of health, illness, and treatment can result in miscommunication and reduced treatment adherence.³⁶ These barriers, compounded by differing cultural conceptualizations of illness and treatment, often lead to miscommunication, reduced engagement, and a significant breach of patient autonomy within the mainstream healthcare system.³⁷

Education and Training

Significant gaps exist in English language learning opportunities, particularly for advanced English language instruction that enables professional employment rather than only basic communication.³⁸ Waiting periods for Adult Migrant English Program classes can be extensive, delaying skill development and employment readiness.

Vocational training programs do not consistently align with local labour market demands or recognise the diverse skill sets that humanitarian arrivals bring.³⁹ Parents report challenges supporting their children's education when they themselves have limited English proficiency or unfamiliarity with the Australian education system. Children who have experienced disrupted education require specialised support that is not always available.⁴⁰

³⁵ Victorian Refugee Health Network (VRHN), *Submission: Australia's Humanitarian Program 2026-27*, April 2026.

³⁶ Department of Health, *NCSP Healthcare Provider Toolkit: Understanding Barriers for CALD Backgrounds*, March 2026.

³⁷ Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), *Annual Report 2025: Mental Health Inequities in Multicultural Communities*.

³⁸ Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN), *How can the AMEP better support English language learning?*, 2024.

³⁹ Jobs and Skills Australia, *The Australian Labour Market for Migrants – Edition 3*, February 2026.

⁴⁰ Victorian Department of Education, *Refugee Education Support Program (RESP) 2026-2027 Guidelines*, June 2025.

4. KEY FINDINGS

4.3 Service Delivery and Resourcing Issues

Settlement service providers consistently identified systemic challenges that constrain their capacity to deliver effective, coordinated support. These issues reflect broader structural problems in how humanitarian settlement is funded and coordinated across government and non-government sectors.⁴¹

Resource and Funding Constraints

The Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) provides intensive support for a period of six to eighteen months, after which funding ceases. However, data indicates that humanitarian arrivals particularly those with complex needs such as disabilities or chronic trauma require sustained support for up to five years to achieve stability.⁴² The gap between funded periods and actual needs often forces settlement workers into “ethical bridging” providing unfunded, informal support to prevent vulnerable clients from falling through the cracks, which creates unsustainable workloads and limits capacity for new arrivals.⁴³

Coordination and Communication Gaps

Limited communication and unclear referral pathways between specialised and mainstream organisations result in service duplication and “referral fatigue” for clients. The absence of interoperable shared case management systems means providers cannot track whether a referred client successfully accessed a service, leading to significant gaps in the continuity of care.⁴⁴

Cultural Competency Development Needs

Mainstream service providers require enhanced training to effectively support refugees from diverse cultural backgrounds. This includes understanding of various religious practices and requirements, diverse family structures and decision-making processes, cultural norms around gender, communication, and authority, appropriate engagement with interpreters and bilingual staff, and trauma-informed practice specific to refugee experiences. Without this foundation, well-intentioned mainstream services may inadvertently provide culturally inappropriate support that reduces engagement and effectiveness.⁴⁵

Data Collection and Evidence Limitations

Insufficient systematic data collection disaggregated by country of origin, arrival pathway, and demographic characteristics limits evidence-based service design. Organisations cannot effectively identify community-specific needs, track settlement outcomes over time, or demonstrate service effectiveness to funders. The absence of shared data collection frameworks prevents regional analysis of settlement patterns and outcomes that could inform strategic service planning.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Victorian Refugee Health Network (VRHN), *Submission: Australia's Humanitarian Program 2026-27*, April 2026.

⁴² Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), *Annual Report 2025: The 'Settlement Gap' in Post-HSP Support*.

⁴³ Settlement Council of Australia (SCoA), *Workforce Pressures in the Settlement Sector: A 2025 Snapshot*, October 2025.

⁴⁴ Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), *Policy and Advocacy: Submission on Refugee and Humanitarian Programs*, April 2025.

⁴⁵ Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV), *Cultural Safety in Healthcare and Social Services: A Regional Perspective*, 2025.

⁴⁶ Scanlon Foundation, *Mapping Social Cohesion 2025: Regional Settlement Trends*, November 2025.

4. KEY FINDINGS

4.4 Geographic and Community-Specific Challenges

The Southern Melbourne Area’s significant diversity, while a regional strength, creates specific coordination challenges that require strategic, place-based responses. The region’s unique characteristics demand approaches that differ from single-community settlement models.⁴⁷

From 1 July 2025, the following table outlines the primary organisations currently involved in settlement and social equity support across the region, categorised by their specific service footprints. **(Table 3)**

Table 3

Organisation	Primary Areas Serviced
54 Reasons	Dandenong, Casey North, Casey South
Afghan Women’s Organisation Victoria	South East Melbourne
Australian Muslim Women’s Centre for Human Rights	Statewide
Catholic Care Victoria	Dandenong, Epping, Wyndham Vale
Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY)	Metropolitan Melbourne
Chinese Community Social Services Centre Inc.	Metropolitan Melbourne
Drummond Street Services	Metropolitan Melbourne
Intouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence	South East Melbourne
MiCare Ltd	South East Metro, Mornington Peninsula, Inner Melbourne, Inner South East, and Western Melbourne Metro
South East Community Links (SECL)	Cardinia, Casey, Dandenong
Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre (SMRC)	Dandenong, Casey, and Cardinia
Victorian Afghan Associations Network Inc.	South East Melbourne
Wellsprings for Women	Casey North, Casey South, Dandenong

Source: Leading Partners Network Resource Directory

⁴⁷ Southern Migrant & Refugee Centre (SMRC), *Annual Report 2024-25*.

4. KEY FINDINGS

4.4 Geographic and Community-Specific Challenges

Multi-Community Coordination Complexity

Unlike regions with concentrated settlement from a single source country, Southern Melbourne Area supports humanitarian arrivals from multiple regions simultaneously, each with distinct cultural, linguistic, and religious characteristics. Service providers must demonstrate competency across Middle Eastern, Asian, and African cultures, understand multiple religious traditions including Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and others, and coordinate support in numerous languages requiring diverse interpreter services.⁴⁸

This diversity necessitates sophisticated community engagement that respects distinct cultural protocols and avoids “one size fits all” communication.⁴⁹

Cross-Municipal Service Coordination

Services must be coordinated across three municipalities Greater Dandenong, Casey, and Cardinia each with different local government structures, service landscapes, and community demographics. Humanitarian arrivals may access services across municipal boundaries, requiring coordination mechanisms that transcend local government areas.⁵⁰

Different concentrations of particular communities across municipalities require tailored approaches while maintaining overall regional coordination. The varying needs and priorities across the three local government areas reinforce the case for an independent service or position to lead regional coordination, one that is able to balance the perspectives of each municipality rather than advocate for the interests of any one local government.

Diverse Trauma and Support Needs

New arrivals from different conflict contexts present diverse trauma responses, family structures, and educational backgrounds. Experiences of persecution vary significantly from ethnic or religious persecution, gender-based violence, experiences as unaccompanied minors, prolonged displacement in refugee camps, to family separation.⁵¹ These varying experiences necessitate differentiated support approaches rather than one-size-fits-all settlement programs. A child with disrupted education from a camp setting has fundamentally different service requirements than an adult professional fleeing sudden urban conflict.⁵²

⁴⁸ Victorian Refugee Health Network (VRHN), *Quarterly Settlement Data Bulletin: Q4 2025*, March 2026.

⁴⁹ Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV), *Submission: Australia's Humanitarian Program 2026-27*, April 2026.

⁵⁰ City of Greater Dandenong, *Advocacy Priorities for 2025-26: Supporting our Multicultural Community*, March 2026.

⁵¹ Dr Ida Kaplan, *Rebuilding Shattered Lives* (2nd Ed. 2020).

⁵² Ibid.

5. SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES: CASE STUDIES

The following case studies illustrate real settlement experiences documented through stakeholder consultation. Details have been de-identified to protect participant privacy, and consent was obtained for inclusion. These cases demonstrate the complex, intersecting barriers humanitarian arrivals encounter and highlight critical service gaps requiring coordinated responses.



Case Study 1:

Family with Complex Disability Support Needs

Challenges: NDIS Navigation, Accessible Housing, Care Responsibilities

Settlement Context

A male participant arrived in 2022 with his wife and children, including one child with an intellectual disability requiring ongoing support and supervision. The family settled in Southern Melbourne Area following initial HSP support services.

Barriers Encountered

The father receives Carer Payment, which limits his employment options and restricts family income. Despite applying twice for National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) support with assistance from settlement services, incorrect or incomplete documentation caused significant delays in assessment for his son's disability support needs. The family experienced extended periods without appropriate support services while awaiting NDIS approval.

Additionally, the family struggled to locate suitable accommodation meeting their child's specific needs. Standard rental properties lacked necessary modifications, while accessible housing options remained extremely limited and unaffordable. The combination of limited income and specific housing requirements created acute housing stress.

Required System Improvements

- **Specialised NDIS navigation support:**
Dedicated disability support navigators with expertise in NDIS systems specifically for humanitarian arrivals unfamiliar with Australian disability support frameworks.
- **Enhanced settlement worker training:**
Comprehensive training for settlement workers on NDIS eligibility requirements, documentation standards, and application processes to prevent delays caused by incorrect submissions.
- **Coordinated case management:**
Integrated case management systems linking settlement services with disability support services to ensure seamless transitions and coordinated support planning.
- **Accessible housing options:**
Increased availability of modified or accessible housing suitable for families with members who have disabilities, along with financial support for necessary modifications.

5. SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES: CASE STUDIES



Case Study 2: Single Woman Facing Employment and Housing Barriers

Challenges: Local Experience Requirements, Driver Licensing, Cultural Safety, Social Isolation

Settlement Context

A single woman arrived in Australia in 2023 and settled in the Southeast region in shared accommodation. She holds a master's degree completed in English and brings significant international work experience in her field of expertise.

Barriers Encountered

Employment barriers:

Despite her qualifications and experience, the lack of Australian work experience represented her primary barrier to securing professional employment.

Employers consistently prioritised local experience over international credentials. She could not afford the cost of obtaining a driver's licence, yet most locally available unskilled positions required vehicle access. This placed her in an impossible situation, unable to access professional roles matching her qualifications and unable to meet requirements for alternative employment options.

Financial constraints:

Her Jobseeker payment proved insufficient to cover the cost of shared accommodation, creating ongoing financial stress and limiting her capacity to meet the basic costs of her settlement and job-seeking journey, including transportation, appropriate clothing for interviews and professional development.

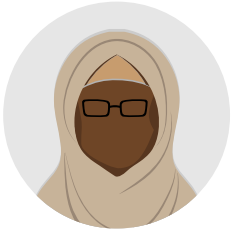
Housing and safety concerns:

The shared accommodation placement was culturally inappropriate for a single woman. She was placed with an established family unit with whom she had no prior connection or cultural affinity. She reported feeling unsafe in this living arrangement, which compounded her settlement stress and sense of isolation. The lack of culturally appropriate housing options for single women represents a significant gap in settlement planning.

Required System Improvements

- **Women's employment pathway programs:**
Targeted programs supporting women to develop job-readiness skills, understand Australian workplace culture, and access employment opportunities matched to their skill levels and qualifications.
- **Flexible employment recognition:**
Advocacy with employers to recognise international experience and qualifications, develop internship or mentorship programs providing local experience, and create flexible pathways accommodating varying competency levels.
- **Culturally safe housing:**
Support for housing providers to deliver culturally safe, affordable accommodation for new arrivals, with particular attention to appropriate placements for single women and consideration of cultural compatibility in shared accommodation arrangements.
- **Social connection support:**
Targeted support programs ensuring single arrivals develop cultural and social connections, reducing isolation and building support networks essential for successful settlement.
- **Financial assistance for licensing:**
Subsidised driver education and licensing programs recognising that vehicle access represents a critical employment enabler in areas with limited public transport.

5. SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCES: CASE STUDIES



Case Study 3: Professionally Qualified Woman Experiencing Qualification Recognition Barriers

Challenges: International Qualification Recognition, Professional Pathway Access, Mental Health Impact

Settlement Context

A woman arrived in 2022 and settled in the Southeast region. She holds a master's degree from Afghanistan in a medical field and brought significant professional experience and academic achievement.

Barriers Encountered

The participant expressed profound disappointment that her achievements have gone unrecognised in Australia. Despite years of study and professional practice in her home country, she faces substantial barriers to practicing in her field in Australia. Her experience highlights the significant gap between having international qualifications and accessing pathways to utilise them in the Australian medical field.

The qualification recognition process proved complex, expensive, and lengthy, with unclear pathways forward. Professional registration requirements, while necessary for public safety, created seemingly insurmountable barriers for someone without local experience or connections to navigate the system. She acknowledged the need for streamlined academic recognition processes that would enable people with her background to access meaningful employment aligned with their qualifications and experience.

The psychological impact of professional deskilling, working in roles substantially below her qualification level affected her mental health and sense of self-worth. The gap between her professional identity in her country of origin and her current employment status created ongoing distress.

Required System Improvements

- **Employer partnership programs:**
Strategic partnerships with employers to create pathways for professionally qualified humanitarian arrivals, including bridging programs, supervised practice opportunities, and mentorship initiatives that recognise international experience while building local credentials.
- **Integrated mental health support:**
Mental health and wellbeing support specifically for individuals experiencing professional deskilling and employment barriers, recognising the psychological impact of underemployment and unrecognised qualifications.
- **Professional pathway navigation:**
Specialised support navigating qualification recognition processes, professional registration requirements, and bridging programs. This includes financial support for assessment fees, bridging courses, and examination costs that represent significant barriers.
- **Streamlined recognition processes:**
Advocacy for more efficient, transparent qualification recognition processes that reduce unnecessary barriers while maintaining appropriate professional standards.

Common Themes Across Case Studies

These case studies reveal consistent themes: the inadequacy of time-limited support periods for complex needs, gaps in coordination between settlement services and specialised support systems (NDIS, employment services, housing providers), insufficient cultural competency in mainstream services, and the compounding effect of multiple barriers that reinforce disadvantage. Addressing these systemic issues requires coordinated, place-based responses that extend beyond individual organisational mandates.

6. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on comprehensive stakeholder consultation and analysis of settlement experiences, the Think Tank has identified strategic priorities organised across three implementation timeframes. This structured approach enables progressive development of coordinated settlement support while addressing immediate critical gaps.

Immediate Actions (0-6 Months)

Priority interventions requiring immediate implementation to address critical coordination gaps.

1. Opportunity to Re-establish Southeast Regional Settlement Planning Committee

There is a clear need to re-establish a governance committee for strategic intercultural service coordination across the Southern Melbourne Area. To avoid conflicts of interest and ensure balanced regional representation, this committee should be led by a neutral, independent backbone organisation specifically funded for this role, with the three Southern Melbourne Area Councils as active members. By aligning with National Settlement Outcome Standards, the Committee could offer a cohesive framework for governance, strategic direction and shared coordination mechanisms to influence the support for humanitarian arrivals and refugees.

Potential Key Actions: To effectively re-establish the committee, there is an opportunity to collaboratively develop terms of reference that reflect current regional priorities while inviting membership from a broad range of key stakeholder groups to ensure diverse representation. By establishing a regular schedule for coordination meetings to maintain momentum, the group can explore governance structures that support shared accountability and collective effectiveness across the region.

2. Develop Shared Resource Database

Create a comprehensive, accessible database of settlement resources, services, and referral pathways covering all cultural communities in the region. This database will be accessible to all member organisations, enabling efficient referrals and reducing duplication.

Key Actions: Map all available services across the region, develop accessible online platform, establish protocols for maintaining currency of information, and train staff across organisations in database utilisation.

3. Create Standardised Referral Protocols

Establish clear, standardised referral protocols between organisations for diverse client populations, ensuring seamless transitions between services and reducing confusion for clients navigating multiple touchpoints.

Key Actions: Map referral pathways for common client needs, develop standardised referral documentation, establish feedback mechanisms confirming successful service connection, and create escalation protocols for complex cases requiring coordinated intervention.

Medium-term Goals (6-18 Months)

Strategic initiatives building on immediate actions to create systemic improvements.

1. Launch Integrated Employment Pathways Program

Collaborate with the stakeholders of the leading partner network and partner with employment pathways funded initiatives to develop comprehensive employment programs combining international qualification recognition support, workplace cultural preparation and employer engagement promoting multicultural workforce benefits. Programs will address the full spectrum of employment barriers identified through consultation, from qualification recognition through to workplace integration.

2. Establish Community Connector/Guide Positions

Design a Community Connector program engaging local community champions to facilitate connections between new arrivals and essential services. This model draws on successful precedents, including community champion approaches used during COVID-19, where locally embedded leaders provided trusted navigation support with minimal resource intensity. These positions will provide sustained support beyond initial HSP periods, assisting humanitarian arrivals to navigate complex systems and access appropriate services matched to their needs.

3. Develop Specialised Complex Needs Navigation Services

Establish specialised navigation services for humanitarian arrivals with complex needs across different cultural contexts, including disability support, chronic health conditions, and trauma requiring sustained therapeutic intervention. Navigation services will provide expert guidance through systems such as NDIS, healthcare, and mental health supports.

4. Cultural Learning and cultural Competency Across Social Services and Government Departments

Develop and deliver comprehensive cultural education programs for mainstream service providers covering the full diversity of refugee communities settling in the region. Programs will provide detailed understanding of cultural practices, religious requirements, family structures, and effective service delivery approaches for each major community group.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ The *Connections that Matter: Inter-cultural Dialogue and Social Cohesion Initiative* in the South East of Melbourne (2026) provides a relevant model and evidence base for why cultural understanding must be treated as a cornerstone of effective social cohesion and settlement outcomes.

6. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Long-term Strategic Vision (18+ Months)

Foundational system changes establishing sustainable, coordinated settlement support.

1. Advocate for Sustainable Funding Models

Work systematically with Commonwealth and State governments to establish funding models that support ongoing settlement needs across diverse populations beyond initial HSP periods. Advocacy will be grounded in evidence demonstrating the inadequacy of time limited support for complex settlement needs and the cost-effectiveness of sustained support preventing crisis intervention.

2. Establish SMA as Recognised Place-Based Settlement Model, Underpinned by Comprehensive Outcome Measurement

Position the Southern Melbourne Area as a national model for place-based humanitarian settlement support. This requires the development of robust evaluation frameworks that capture settlement outcomes across multiple community perspectives, incorporating both quantitative indicators and qualitative lived experience data. Evidence of effective coordination, culturally responsive service delivery and positive settlement outcomes will support advocacy to State and Federal Government for sustainable funding.

7. IMPLEMENTATION FRAMEWORK

Successful implementation of the Think Tank's strategic priorities requires clear governance structures, defined responsibilities, and a commitment to sustained action across the Southern Melbourne Area.

The recommendations in this report are indicated across three timeframes; immediate, medium-term and long-term, to enable progressive, coordinated development of settlement support across the region.

A detailed operational plan, including governance structures, terms of reference, timelines, and accountability mechanisms, would be recommended to be co-developed with the relevant coordination body once funding and resourcing is confirmed.

This plan would also incorporate ongoing monitoring and evaluation to track progress against the National Settlement Outcome Standards and ensure the region can adapt to shifting humanitarian needs over time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Southern Melbourne Area Refugee Settlement Think Tank represents a collaborative effort across government agencies, service providers, community organisations and most importantly, humanitarian arrivals who generously shared their settlement experiences to inform this work.

This report was developed through the leadership and coordination of the City of Casey's Cultural and Social Equity officer, whose dedication to regional collaboration and evidence-based development has been instrumental in bringing together diverse stakeholders and synthesising their insights into actionable strategic priorities. The stakeholder consultation, desktop review, and analytical work undertaken to produce this framework reflects a significant investment in place-based settlement support.

We acknowledge the Community Partnerships team, Southern Melbourne Area, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH), whose leadership in convening the initial Think Tank was pivotal in bringing this collaborative body into existence. Their ongoing commitment to coordinated, place-based settlement support has been foundational to everything that followed.

We extend sincere gratitude to all Think Tank members for their expertise, generosity of time, and sustained commitment to improving settlement outcomes across the region. Your dedication to collaborative, coordinated service delivery has shaped every priority in this report.

We acknowledge the settlement service providers who deliver critical frontline support to humanitarian arrivals across the Southern Melbourne Area, particularly Southern Migrant Refugee Centre, AMES Australia, and community service organisations working tirelessly to support new arrivals. Their insights into service delivery challenges and opportunities have been invaluable.

We thank local government partners the City of Casey, City of Greater Dandenong and Cardinia Shire for their commitment to supporting settlement in their municipalities and for contributing their local knowledge and coordination efforts to this regional initiative.

We acknowledge Monash Health and our health sector partners for their expertise in delivering culturally responsive health services and their commitment to addressing the health disparities that disproportionately affect refugee communities.

We thank the Refugee Council of Australia and Victorian Refugee Health Network for their policy expertise and advocacy that continues to strengthen settlement support nationally and in Victoria.

Most importantly, this work reflects our commitment to elevating the voices of people with lived experience from diverse refugee backgrounds. We are deeply grateful to the humanitarian arrivals who shared their settlement journeys, challenges, and aspirations with us. Your experiences have shaped every recommendation in this report. Our goal is settlement support that truly responds to the varied needs and priorities of all who call the Southern Melbourne Area home.

SOUTHERN MELBOURNE AREA – SETTLEMENT AND COMMUNITY NETWORKS

The following networks and committees reflect the breadth and complexity of the settlement and community services landscape across the Southern Melbourne Area. The Think Tank's development involved consultation across these established networks, ensuring that findings and recommendations reflect diverse perspectives across the full spectrum of settlement service delivery.

1. Afghan Stakeholder Network
2. Anti-Racism Network
3. Cardinia CALD Network
4. Cardinia Liveability Partnership Steering Group
5. Cardinia Youth Services Network
6. Casey Cardinia Skills and Jobs Network
7. Casey Homelessness and Social Inclusion Network
8. Casey North Integrated Settlement and Support Network (CNISS)
9. Casey Youth Network
10. City of Greater Dandenong Youth Network
11. Community Information and Support Cranbourne (CISC)
12. Dandenong Skills and Jobs Network
13. LGBTQIA+ Network
14. Material Aid Consortium
15. Monash Multicultural and Settlement Services Network (MMSSN)
16. Multicultural and People Seeking Asylum Advisory Committee (MAPSAAC)
17. Multicultural Communities Family Violence Working Group
18. Multicultural Youth Action Group (MYAG)
19. NASA Vic 3 Es
20. Relief and Recovery Network
21. South East CALD Network
22. South East Melbourne PHN Suicide Prevention Collaborative
23. Services Australia Vic/Tas Multicultural Advisory Forum
24. SETS Providers Network
25. Settlement Leading Partners Network
26. Skills and Jobs Network
27. SMA Afghan Strategic Advisory Group
28. SMA Refugee Settlement Think Tank
29. South East Regional Settlement Planning Committee (SERSPC)
30. Southeast CALD Network
31. Southern Primary Prevention Network (PRET)
32. Southern Melbourne Area Afghan Strategic Advisory Group
33. Southern Melbourne Family Violence Regional Integration Committee
34. Together We Can Network
35. Victorian Refugee Health Network

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Note on Data Sources: Population and demographic data presented in this report are derived from the 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing. Some data points referenced in stakeholder consultations require further verification and will be updated in subsequent iterations of this document. Community-specific data on settlement experiences have been de-identified to protect participant privacy.

Contact Information

For more information about the Southern Melbourne Area Refugee Settlement Think Tank, to provide feedback on this report or to enquire about participation in implementation initiatives, please contact:

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