



## REFUGEE COMMUNITIES IN THE ILLAWARRA 2025

According to the *Migration Act 1958* a **refugee** is someone who is outside their home country and cannot return because they have a well-founded fear of persecution due to their:

- Race
- Religion
- Political opinion
- Nationality
- Membership of a particular social group.

As a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention (1951) Australia is obliged to provide protection to refugees and to ensure they are not returned to any place where they are likely to face persecution.

An **asylum seeker** is someone who is seeking protection but whose claim for refugee status has not yet been assessed.

Wollongong has a long history as a place of settlement for refugees, including the European communities who arrived after World War II, the Vietnamese in the 70s and Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian communities in the 90s; the most recently arrived people are from the Middle East, Myanmar, African nations and Ukraine. A strong network of local services supports their settlement.

Wollongong's small but growing refugee population is made up of a diverse number of ethnic and language groups. There is also diversity within our refugee communities regarding education levels, literacy and language skills and health status. Many have been born outside their country, often in a refugee camp or an urban refugee setting.

Australia's intake of refugees and asylum seekers fluctuates according to global conflict and government policy. For **2023-2024** fiscal year a total of **17,875** humanitarian visas were granted. Of these, 15,875 visas were part of the Offshore program (including the 4,125 additional places allocated to Afghan nationals) and 2,000 visas for the Onshore (Protection visa) program.

In **2024-2025**, the number of humanitarian visa grants will increase to **20,000 places** (Source: [Department of Home Affairs \(2024\)](#)). Additionally, the Australian Government "has allocated 26,500 dedicated visa places for Afghans to migrate to Australia under the offshore Humanitarian Program through to 2026" (Source: [Department of Home Affairs \(2024\): Afghanistan Update](#)). While the total intake for the Refugee and Humanitarian Program has increased by 12.6% since 2022-2023, the Migration Program Planning level, which was 160,500 (in 2022-2023), has been set for 185,000 places for 2024-2025 (representing 15.2% increase; the highest core program intake since 2012. (Source: [Department of Home Affairs \(2024\)](#); [Refugee Council of Australia \(2024\)](#)).

1. **Offshore Resettlement:** People who come from a country of asylum to Australia. They are granted permanent resident visas on arrival and are entitled to a full range of settlement services (Source: [Refugee Council of Australia 2024](#)).

There are five refugee categories under the Offshore Resettlement Scheme

- a. **Refugee Visa (sub class 200\*)** Majority identified by UNHCR and referred to Australian Government for consideration and resettlement.
- b. **In-Country Special Humanitarian Programme Visa (sub class 201)** For those living in their home country, unable to leave and subject to persecution.

- c. **Global Special Humanitarian Visa (sub class 202\*)** Not refugees but subject to substantial discrimination; have links to family in Australia who undertake to pay for travel to Australia and support their settlement.
- d. **Emergency Rescue Visa (sub class 203)** Refugees who need urgent resettlement.
- e. **Woman at Risk Visa (sub class 204\*)** Women in danger due to their gender; majority are identified by UNHCR and referred to Australian Government.

\*In 2024 Wollongong’s intake consisted of holders of 200, 202 and 204 visa subclasses

**Community Support Programme (CSP):** Operating since July 2017, CSP enables communities, businesses, families, and individuals to propose Humanitarian Visa applicants and support them on arrival. Proposers under the CSP must provide adequate support to enable the proposed entrant to achieve financial self-sufficiency within the first year of arrival in Australia ([Source: Department of Home Affairs \(2024\)](#)). CSP is delivered locally by **Illawarra Multicultural Services**.

If you hold a visa from the above categories, you may also be able to reunite your split family by bringing your immediate family members to Australia

2. **Onshore Resettlement:** Asylum seekers who are already in Australia.
  - a. **Protection Visa (sub class 866):** Allows person to live and work as a permanent resident; have access to Centrelink and Medicare services; is not open to maritime arrivals.
  - b. **Temporary Protection Visa (TPV):** Valid for up to three years; allows person to work and study.
  - c. **Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV):** A temporary protection visa valid for five years. It encourages people to work and study in regional Australia.

Those who have entered illegally, according to the Department of Home Affairs (arrived by boat, without a valid visa or without immigration clearance) may be able to apply for a TPV or SHEV

## Key Statistics

Key Statistics cover Wollongong LGA. However, some humanitarian migrants have also settled in the other LGAs of the Illawarra region (Shellharbour and Shoalhaven).

*Table 1.0 total number of humanitarian entrants arriving in the Illawarra by country of birth from 2002-2024; does not capture secondary migration*

<b>2006–2009</b>	467	Myanmar, Congo, Liberia, Burundi, Iraq, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Togo.
<b>2010</b>	107	Myanmar, Congo (DRC), Liberia, Ethiopia.
<b>2011</b>	119	Myanmar, Iraq, Iran, Eritrea, Ghana.
<b>2012</b>	238	Libya, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Burundi
<b>2013</b>	376	Iraq, Iran, Eritrea, Libya, Burma, Congo (DRC); 34% are 16 years and under.
<b>2014</b>	420	Syria, Myanmar, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Togo.
<b>2015</b>	103	Iraq, Syria, Myanmar, Congo (DRC), Eritrea.
<b>2016</b>	463	Syria, Iraq, Myanmar, Congo (DRC)
<b>2017</b>	78	Syria, Iraq, Myanmar.

<b>2018</b>	224	Syria, Congo (DRC), Eritrea, Myanmar
<b>2019</b>	331	Congo (DRC), Syria, Iraq, Eritrea, Myanmar, Ethiopia, Burundi, Iran
<b>2020 - 2021</b>	69	Iraq, Myanmar, Iran, Syria, one stateless person. 63 were resettled outside of Wollongong.
<b>2022</b>	335	Syria, Iraq, Congo (DRC), Myanmar, Ukraine
<b>2023</b>	140	Syria, Congo (DRC), Myanmar, Burundi, Iran & Iraq
<b>2024</b>	210	Syria, Congo (DRC), Myanmar, Eritrea

**Data source:** Navitas English 2010-2017 Red Cross from November 2017  
*\*majority, not all, are from the countries listed.*

### **Current Trends**

- Covid 19 halted the Humanitarian Entrants program in March 2020, arrivals were restricted until end of 2021.
- Wollongong has been a national priority regional settlement site for women at risk (Visa sub class 204) since 2012.
- 202-visa subclass represents the highest number of the total number of humanitarian entrants in recent years.

### **Language**

Many former refugees in our city are from ethnic minority groups. Many speak a tribal language/s and may speak a mainstream language as well.

The most highly represented languages since 2011 are Arabic (corresponding to refugees from Syria and Iraq), Karen (from Myanmar), Farsi (from Iran and Afghanistan) and Swahili (from Democratic Republic of Congo)

Middle Eastern minority languages include Kurdish and Chaldean.

The first language for Afghanis is likely to be Dari or Pashto. Hazara Afghans are likely to speak Hazaraghi.

People from African nations in our city speak a tribal language (such as Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, Tigrinya) as well as Swahili or sometimes French.

The Banyamulenge people are a significant and distinct cultural group in our city. They are a Tutsi ethnic minority in Congo who originally come from Rwanda. Their first language is Kinyamulenge.

Former refugees from Myanmar are mostly from the Karen, Karenni, Chin and Kachin hill tribes. Each tribe has a unique language and culture. Not all speak the Burmese language. In addition, Wollongong is home to a significant number of Zomi people, who are a distinct language and cultural group from the Chin State. Many former refugees from Myanmar are not literate in their first language (especially older people) and face a higher barrier to learning English.

[Recent arrivals - Language spoken at home | Wollongong City Council | Community profile](#)

### **Religion**

The majority (though not all) of newly arrived Middle Eastern communities are Muslim. There are two main denominations of Islam – Shi'ite or Shia, and Sunni. The Bilal Mosque, Cringila, the Omar

Mosque, Gwynneville, the Uthman Mosque, Oak Flats and the Masjid As-Salam Mosque, Berkeley, are Sunni-based communities. There is a Shi'ite Mosque in Cringila (Auburn Parade). Hazara Afghans are Shia. A considerable number of African, Middle Eastern, Burmese and Ukrainian communities are Christian and are part of local church communities.

### ***Level of Education***

There is significant diversity in terms of educational ability and skill, ranging from newly arrived refugees with tertiary qualifications and strong English skills and a sizeable number with little or no English.

Young people who are former refugees have often had significant disruption to their school education journeys.

### ***Health***

The health issues presented by newly arrived refugees are highly complex given the physical and psychological disabilities acquired through conflict-related trauma. A significant proportion also arrive with cognitive, developmental and mobility-related disabilities. This requires complex case coordination from disability specialist services and ongoing social and personal care supports and interventions.

### ***Settlement Services***

**Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP)** – The Federal Department of Home Affairs (DHA) funds the delivery and coordination of settlement services for humanitarian entrants for up to 18 months after arrival. This includes individual case management, orientation and accommodation. The local provider is the **Australian Red Cross**.

Red Cross volunteers help to meet the initial settlement needs of individuals and/or families, orientation to the community and ongoing individual social support.

Basic Household Good packages are provided to all newly arrived people.

**Specialised and Intensive Services (SIS)** – A federally funded program that provides services (most often short sharp intervention) for up to 5 years after arrival for those with multiple complex barriers. Referrals from individuals and service providers can be made online to DHA. Clients can include those who are not already part of the HSP. For HSP clients, this support complements their existing case management.

The local provider is **Australian Red Cross**.

**Settlement Engagement & Transition Support Program (SETS)** – DHA funds this program to equip and empower humanitarian entrants, other eligible permanent migrants (excluding Australian citizens) and their communities to address their settlement needs. It focuses on improving social participation, economic well-being, independence, personal well-being and community connectedness.

SETS fills an important gap in the post-arrival period for eligible clients who do not have family and other community supports to rely on.

The local provider is **Multicultural Communities Council Illawarra (MCCI)**

<https://www.mcci.org.au/>

## **Health Services**

All new arrivals through the HSP are provided with comprehensive health screening services and are referred to a local GP for ongoing care and treatment. **Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District's Multicultural Health Service** coordinates access to public health services and information sessions on accessing the health system. For more information, visit: <https://www.islhd.health.nsw.gov.au/services-clinics/refugee-health>

**STARTTS** provides psychological & trauma specialist services. **NEAMI** provides mental health services. **Transcultural Mental Health Centre** provides counselling in some community languages. <https://www.dhi.health.nsw.gov.au/transcultural-mental-health-centre>

**Grand Pacific Health Community Living Support for Refugees (MH-CLSR)** program supports mental health and wellbeing. It focuses on promoting independence, building new skills, and connecting individuals to services and community supports. <https://www.gph.org.au/services/mental-health/clsr/>

## **Employment Services**

Newly arrived refugees access Centrelink Newstart Allowance and Workforce Australia Employment Services including Max Solutions, APM, People Plus and MBC.

**Centrelink Multicultural Services Officer** provides ongoing support and information.

**Green Connect** connects former refugees and young people at risk with work and training in a range of industries. <https://green-connect.com.au/>

## **Education Services**

The federally funded **Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)** provides adults with free English language tuition. The local provider is **Max Solutions** (under contract to Navitas English).

- Classroom tuition through either full-time or part-time study.
- Two streams of tuition: Pre-employment English stream and Social English stream.
- Distance learning through a package of learning material supported by regular telephone or internet contact with an AMEP qualified teacher.
- Home Tutor Scheme which provides language assistance by a trained volunteer.
- Self-paced e-learning as supplementary learning

**KU Children's Services** provides free childcare for under school-aged children as part of the AMEP program.

## **TAFE NSW (ESOL)**

- Wollongong TAFE has English Language classes from beginner level to academic level.
- Enrolments at the beginning of each semester, in January and June.
- Community-based **English Conversation classes** are offered in numerous locations.

More info: <https://wollongong.nsw.gov.au/my-community/community-support/multicultural-communities/language-services/english-language-support>.

## ***Children and young people***

Children between 5 and 11 years of age are enrolled in their local primary school as soon as possible after arrival. Newly arrived students in primary schools receive targeted, intensive English support at the beginning of their Australian schooling. Ongoing English language and wellbeing support is provided across the curriculum throughout the student's schooling journey.

Children who are 12 years of age or older attend **Warrawong Intensive English Centre (IEC)**, located at Warrawong High School, for initial intensive English learning. Following this, the students transition to their local high school, where English language support is provided across the curriculum alongside support for wellbeing and welfare.

Children and young people have been referred to the Catholic school system since 2016, including Good Samaritan (Fairy Meadow), St Frances Assisi (Warrawong) and St Therese (West Wollongong) primary schools.

## ***Housing Services***

**Red Cross** provides on-arrival accommodation, tenancy support and orientation to secure long-term accommodation as part of the HSP. In 2016, the first families settled in the Shellharbour area.

Upon arrival, clients stay for up to 28 days in short-term accommodation (STA), while long-term accommodation (LTA) is secured. Red Cross utilises head lease properties which are subleased, if the tenants are approved by the real estate agent.

### *Issues*

- Shortage of long-term rental properties.
- Shortage of one-bedroom housing for single clients.
- Shortage of four-bedroom housing for large families.

## ***Service Coordination***

- Illawarra Refugee Issues Forum (IRIF) is held quarterly and is open to all organisations working with refugee communities; convened by Wollongong City Council
- Illawarra CALD Water Safety Committee – convened by NSW Office of Sport
- Illawarra Multicultural Youth Network - convened by MCCI

## ***Community-based Settlement Support***

### **Illawarra Multicultural Services (IMS)**

<https://www.ims.org.au/>

Information, support and assistance for migrants, former refugees and humanitarian entrants.

- Individual and family support
  - **Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI)** program for children, young people, families and communities who are experiencing or are at risk of vulnerability.
  - **Community Support Program (CSP)** enables communities, businesses, families and individuals to offer support to offshore refugees with visa applications and later in their settlement pathway in Australia.
  - **National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)** Support Coordination assists people with a disability and their carers to identify, develop, coordinate and access relevant and approved supports and services or assist individuals and their families to do this on their own.
  - **Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence program**

- Community Projects including multicultural playgroups, Start Strong Pathways program, food security program
- Support for agencies including language aide program, childminding scheme

### **Multicultural Communities Council Illawarra (MCCI)**

<https://www.mcci.org.au/>

Regional peak body for multicultural communities. Provides a wide range of services for people, including former refugees:

- SETS Program (see earlier entry)
- L2P Driver Mentoring Program
- After school 'Homework Help' and 'High School Tutoring'
- Social inclusion activities and events e.g. Weekly 'Let's Chat' Program
- Employment + Training Mentoring Program
- Monthly Legal Aid Outreach Clinics
- Community Nurse Clinic in Wollongong
- Health & Wellbeing Initiatives
- Community Hubs (drop in) in Wollongong and Nowra
- Multicultural Youth Development Program
- Burmese Social Support Group, for older Burmese people from a refugee background
- Community Aged Care Services

### **NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture & Trauma Survivors (STARTTS)**

<https://www.startts.org.au/about-us/>

- Psychological & trauma specialist services, free counselling, including child & adolescent counselling
- Youth activities and support
- Community Hubs Australia program - supports parents and children located in Wollongong, Primbee, and Warrawong Primary schools
- Families in Cultural Transition program (FICT) – delivered by bi-lingual educators
- Community Development projects
- Training for service providers

### **Southern Youth and Family Services**

<https://www.syfs.org.au/services/newly-arrived-youth-specialists-nays>

Support, counselling, case management and crisis intervention for young people aged between 12 to 21 years who are vulnerable, disadvantaged, homeless or those at risk of disadvantage and homelessness and their families, who have migrated to Australia in the last five years. Priority is given to those who have entered Australia on Humanitarian Visas.

### **Anglicare**

<https://www.anglicare.org.au/what-we-offer/family-parenting-youth-support/family-services/>

Family Mental Health Support Service provides casework and counselling.

### **Wollongong City Council**

<https://wollongong.nsw.gov.au/my-community/community-support/refugees>

Refugee Welcome Zone since 2005

- Sector support and development
- Library Services, Youth Services and Lifeguard Services
- Illawarra Refugee Challenge - high school education program
- Support for Refugee Week events

## **Language Services**

Translation Information Service (TIS National) phone interpreting  
<https://www.tisnational.gov.au/>

Free Translating Service  
<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settling-in-australia/settle-in-australia/language-services/free-translating-service>

Illawarra Multicultural Services – Language Aide service, fees apply  
<https://www.ims.org.au/>

Language Services Multicultural NSW: fees apply  
<https://multicultural.nsw.gov.au/services/>

## **Further Information**

Department of Home Affairs  
<https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/>

Refugee Council of Australia  
<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/our-community/>

UNCHR – UN Refugee Agency  
<https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/>

Roads to Refuge (teaching resource)  
<https://www.roads-to-refuge.com.au/>

Refugee Week  
<https://www.refugeeweek.org.au/>

Legal Aid  
<https://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au/what-we-do/civil-law/refugee-service>

Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law  
<https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/>

SBS Cultural Atlas  
<https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/>