VISAS FOR GPS
TARGETING AREAS OF DOCTOR SHORTAGES

PROGRAM GUIDELINES
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Introduction

The Visas for GPs: Targeting areas of doctor shortages is a policy initiative announced as a 2018-19 Budget Measure that contributes to Portfolio Strategic Priority 1 – Better Health and Ageing Outcomes and Reduced Inequality through enabling access for people in rural, remote and regional areas. The initiative also contributes to Portfolio Outcome 2 - Access and Support Services through improved access to high quality, comprehensive and coordinated preventive, primary and mental health care for all Australians, with a focus on those with complex health care needs and those living in regional, rural and remote areas, including through access to a skilled health workforce.

The objective of the Visas for GPs initiative is to reduce the number of overseas trained doctors entering the primary health care workforce in well-serviced major capital cities by around 200 annually over four years, and to redirect overseas trained doctors from areas of surplus services (i.e. major metropolitan centres) to areas where they are most needed (i.e. regional, rural and remote areas).

The initiative will commence subject to relevant legislative instruments (under the Migration Act 1958) taking effect.

1. Implementation

The initiative will be implemented through introduction of changed processes in the employer sponsored visas of the Skilled Migration Program. Employers seeking to engage certain medical practitioners via an employer sponsored visa to fill a primary healthcare position will be required to obtain endorsement for the position from the co-ordinating Rural Workforce Agency (RWA).

From the date of commencement of relevant legislative instrument to give effect to the Visas for GPs initiative, RWA endorsement will be required to fill nominated positions with an overseas doctor through an employer sponsored visa in select occupations as defined by the following Australia and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) codes:

- 253111 General Medical Practitioner;
- 253112 Resident Medical Officer;
- 253999 Medical Practitioner not elsewhere classified.

Endorsement for a position will be provided in the form of a Health Workforce Certificate – a letter issued by a RWA confirming the genuine need to fill a position in any of the above three occupations at a given location in Australia by an overseas doctor.

Positions for overseas trained doctors (OTDs) in geographic locations where there is not an identified need for additional primary healthcare services will not receive a Health Workforce Certificate issued by a RWA. Without a Health
Workforce Certificate for a nominated position, the nomination application cannot be approved and the related visa cannot be granted. The Department of Health will engage RWAs to administer the initiative in accordance with the Commonwealth Grants Rules and Guidelines 2017.

1.1 Scope

Home Affairs’ requirement is for employers to obtain a Health Workforce Certificate for all employer sponsored (ES) visa nominations under the three specified ANZSCO occupation codes. Since the initiative targets medical professionals looking for work in Australia’s primary healthcare sector, positions delivering primary healthcare services in the three target occupations will be subject to an assessment.

The below table defines positions eligible for automatic or expedited certification under the Visas for GPs initiative:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Code</th>
<th>Service type</th>
<th>Practitioner</th>
<th>Certification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resident Medical Officer (253112)</td>
<td>Hospital-based service</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>Automatic¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Medical Practitioner (253111)</td>
<td>Hospital-based service</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>Automatic¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Practitioners not elsewhere classified (253999)</td>
<td>Hospital-based service</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>Automatic¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any</td>
<td>Aboriginal Medical Service</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>Expedited²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>ES visa required for an OTD’s continuing employment in a position in the same location</td>
<td>Expedited²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any</td>
<td>Any</td>
<td>ES visa required for an Australian-qualified doctor</td>
<td>Expedited²</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Fully streamlined certification. RWA position assessment is not required.
² Not an automated process. Several administrative steps will be required. RWA position assessment may not be a required step for these positions.

The positions in Table 1 will be issued with a Health Workforce Certificate by the co-ordinating RWA automatically or in an expedited manner. All other positions will require an RWA assessment to determine whether the position is located in an area in need of additional primary health care services in line with the processes at 1.3.1 RWA position assessments.
If the RWA’s assessment determines that the position is located in an area in need of additional primary health care services, the assessing RWA will recommend to the co-ordinating RWA that a Health Workforce Certificate be issued for the nominated position. The co-ordinating RWA will then generate and issue the certificate to the employer.

If the assessing RWA is of the view that the position is not located in an area in need of additional primary healthcare services, the RWA will recommend to the co-ordinating agency that the application for RWA certification be declined. The co-ordinating agency will act on the assessing RWA’s recommendation, and will advise the employer that their application for a Health Workforce Certificate has been declined for the nominated position.

In some circumstances, the co-ordinating RWA may issue a Health Workforce Certificate to an applicant despite the assessing RWA not endorsing the position. These circumstances may include acting on recommendations of the Visas for GPs Review Committee on review of a non-endorsement decision (see 1.3.3 – Review of decisions) or where the Department of Health has advised that circumstances have changed since the last update to the Assessment Tool data (See 1.2 - How will it work in practice? for further detail).

1.2 How will it work in practice?

The objective of the Visas for GPs initiative is to reduce the number of overseas trained doctors entering the primary healthcare system in well-serviced major capital cities and metropolitan areas, by around 200 annually for four years, and to direct the remaining flow of overseas trained doctors to areas in need of primary healthcare medical practitioners. This does not prevent the issuing of any employer sponsored visas for overseas trained doctors in major metropolitan centres. Rather, the number of eligible positions in major metropolitan centres will be adjusted based on the number of applications received and visas granted in the preceding years.

The Department of Health and the Department of Home Affairs will monitor the volume of employer sponsored visa applications lodged and the visas granted over the life of the initiative to monitor trends and the impact of the initiative.

The Department of Health will provide ongoing guidance to the co-ordinating RWA on position certification decision-making criteria, to ensure the reduction targets are met. The Visas for GPs initiative will reduce the number of overseas trained doctors entering the primary healthcare system by setting a planning cap of 200 fewer overseas doctors than those entering the primary healthcare system in 2017-18.
1.3 **Process for certification**

Under the *Visas for GPs* initiative, the Department of Home Affairs website will direct prospective employers and recruitment agents to a landing page on the Department of Health’s *DoctorConnect* website.

The Department’s *Visas for GPs* communication strategy will also direct prospective employers, recruitment agents and other stakeholders to *DoctorConnect*.

The *DoctorConnect* page will provide prospective employers with information about the initiative, access to downloadable application forms, a mailbox for submitting applications, and an 1800 number to contact for further advice. Note: the *Visas for GPs* advice line and inbox will be hosted by a single, co-ordinating RWA – HR+ Tasmania.

HR+ Tasmania, as the co-ordinating RWA, will perform public-facing customer service functions for the initiative, and will co-ordinate the activities of other RWAs as required. The co-ordinating RWA will review applications to determine whether the position specified in the applications are subject to an assessment by a RWA under the *Visas for GPs* initiative. For positions that are not subject to a RWA assessment and are eligible for an automatic and/or expedited certification (Table 1), the co-ordinating RWA will generate Health Workforce Certificates.

Employers and recruitment agents (applicants) must download the application form, fill it in with the requested information and submit to visasforgps@hrplustas.com.au to obtain certification of the nominated position/s. Employers can contact HR+ on 1800 022 000 for further information or to seek clarification on the *Visas for GPs* matters.

The co-ordinating RWA will refer relevant applications to assessing RWAs for assessment. Assessing RWAs will conduct position assessments and provide recommendations on certification eligibility to the co-ordinating RWA who will then issue a Health Workforce Certificate to eligible positions as per the assessing RWAs’ recommendations.

In some cases, employers may seek certification for a position in which a medical practitioner has not yet been identified for visa nomination. In these cases, the co-ordinating RWA will refer the application to the relevant RWA for assessment, as per requirements for assessable positions (noting that the RWA does not require practitioner details in order to perform an assessment and produce a recommendation). Should the assessing RWA recommend certification for the position, the co-ordinating RWA will advise the applicant of the position’s eligibility as ‘endorsed pending practitioner details’ in an email. However, a Health Workforce Certificate will not be generated.

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1 With regard to hospital-based RMO positions, as the majority of these positions will be submitted by State and Territory Government employers, streamlined processing will apply to ensure an automatic certification is provided to nominated position/s.
until a practitioner has been identified for the position and their details provided to the co-ordinating RWA\(^2\). The interim endorsement will expire after three months of the issue date.

The co-ordinating RWA will generate a Health Workforce Certificate for all eligible positions and advise Health Workforce Certificate applicants via email and provide the Health Workforce Certificate as a PDF attachment.

The co-ordinating RWA will also advise Health Workforce Certificate applicants on the outcome of unsuccessful applications via email. This email may offer applicants, and/or the OTDs they want to recruit, options to access further advice and support from RWAs. Advice from the co-ordinating RWA on options and further assistance will be a separate service to the *Visas for GPs* initiative.

The co-ordinating RWA will also refer to the Department of Health any requests for a review of the position assessment decision.

**1.3.1 RWA position assessments**

It is in the interests of fairness and transparency that a standard approach to RWA position assessment is applied consistently and across all jurisdictions.

RWAs will be provided with training and guidelines for using the Department of Health’s *Assessment Tool*, to enter position location information, and to identify the characteristics of the GP Catchment in which the position is located.

The department will also provide position assessment guidelines setting out parameters and thresholds for determining a position’s eligibility for certification according to the GP Catchment’s characteristics.

RWAs will be required to consistently follow the guidelines for performing the *Assessment Tool* informed position assessments. For assessments of positions in Modified Monash Model 1 areas, assessing RWAs will rely on the *Assessment Tool* and will not apply any further criteria in providing their recommendation to the coordinating RWA. The coordinating RWA will make the final decision in accordance with the guidelines and, where provided, advice from the Department of Health.

In line with other contracted workforce assessment and planning functions, RWAs are able to apply their local knowledge and workforce planning expertise where it may be required when making assessments on position assessments in MMM 2 – 7 areas.

\(^2\) Practitioner details such as name, date of birth, qualifications (ie. whether Australian or overseas trained) and employment status (ie. whether currently employed in the position) are required for two purposes: to determine whether the application is subject to a RWA assessment under the initiative, and to ensure that details in the Health Workforce Certificate match those in the employer sponsored visa nomination documentation provided to the Department of Home Affairs.
Employers and practices who have made arrangements to contract an overseas trained doctor prior to the commencement of the initiative will receive a Health Workforce Certificate on production of a signed contract or letter of offer showing agreement from both parties prior to the initiative commencement date.

Sample RWA assessment task

**Figure 1** presents an example of a position assessment task referred to an assessing RWA by the co-ordinating RWA.

The upper section (in grey) contains the information the assessing RWAs require to perform the assessment (Note: assessing RWAs do not require employer or practitioner details in order to assess positions). The lower section (in blue) sets out the information the assessing RWA is required to return to the co-ordinating RWA. Note that ‘Assessment Tool outcome’ and ‘Recommendation’ are separate fields, allowing for assessing RWAs to depart from the Assessment Tool outcome where needed. In such cases, assessing RWAs will be asked to provide a brief rationale for the recommendation.

**Figure 1:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case ID</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupation Code</td>
<td>253111 - General Medical Practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Job Location</td>
<td>5 King St Bourke NSW 2840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Service</td>
<td>1. Primary Health / GP Clinic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Job Location</td>
<td>N/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Service</td>
<td>N/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case ID</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Job Location MMM</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Job Location GP Catchment ID</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Job Location MMM</td>
<td>N/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Job Location GP Catchment ID</td>
<td>N/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment Tool assessment Outcome</td>
<td>Eligible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>Certificate to be issued.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.3.2 Standard words and documentation

*Visas for GPs* communication materials will be provided by the Department of Health to RWAs prior to the initiative commencement date. RWAs will also be provided relevant media updates, progress reports, ad-hoc advice and revised communication materials by the Department of Health over the life of the *Visas for GPs* initiative. These materials, including any corporate branding for
the initiative, may be used on RWAs’ websites and in their correspondence, to communicate with stakeholders about the initiative.

**Standard Application Form**
The co-ordinating RWA will host on its website a downloadable Standard Application Form for Health Workforce Certificate applicants to complete and submit to the designated inbox. A link to the form will be available on the DoctorConnect website, and RWAs may also provide the link on their own websites if they choose, but they are not obliged to do so. The Standard Application Form will include advice to applicants regarding privacy and security of information, and advice regarding the provision of false or misleading information.

See Appendix A for Standard Application Form contents.

Note: Standard Application Form only allows nominating one position for certification.

**Hospital-based Positions Application Form**
The co-ordinating RWA will host on its website a downloadable Hospital-based Position Application Form for Health Workforce Certificate applicants to complete and submit to the designated inbox. A link to the form will be available on the DoctorConnect website, and RWAs may also provide the link on their own websites if they choose, but they are not obliged to do so. The Hospital Application Form will allow State and Territory Health departments (and private hospital administrators) to nominate multiple positions in one application for hospital-based positions. This will be an efficient process given the bulk recruitment practices in place for many hospital-based positions.

See Appendix B for Hospital-based Position Application Form contents.

**Health Workforce Certificate**
The co-ordinating RWA will issue the Health Workforce Certificate to applicants via email, in the form of a PDF attachment. The employer will be required to include this certificate (the PDF document) when submitting their employer sponsor visa nomination application to Home Affairs. The Health Workforce Certificate PDF document will be in a standard format according Home Affairs’ specifications.

The Health Workforce Certificate will need to be lodged with Home Affairs within three months of the issue date. The Certificate will specify the date it needs to be lodged by with the employer sponsored visa nomination Application to Home Affairs.

See Appendix C for Health Workforce Certificate contents.

**Declined applications**
For declined Health Workforce Certificate applications, the co-ordinating RWA will advise Health Workforce Certificate applicants via email, using standard words recommended by the Department of Health. This is to ensure that advice to applicants relating to the Visas for GPs initiative is separate and distinct from any general information and advice provided by RWAs.
**Data items**

The co-ordinating RWA will document and maintain the administrative dataset generated by *Visas for GPs* activities, including the applicant/employer, position and practitioner information from application forms, and other derived items including details on application outcome and reasons for the decision to (or not to) issue a Health Workforce Certificate.

### 1.3.3 Review of decisions

Applicants may request a review of a decision that is unfavourable to them by the Department of Health. A Review Committee at the Department of Health will review the original decision and may confirm the decision or substitute it with a new decision. In cases where an applicant queries or disputes a decision to not issue a Health Workforce Certificate, the co-ordinating RWA will provide to the Department of Health relevant documents pertaining to the original assessment, and will maintain a record of all correspondence with the applicant.

The applicant must notify the co-ordinating RWA in writing that they wish to have a decision reviewed. The co-ordinating RWA will refer them to the Department of Health’s Review Committee. The Department of Health will only receive requests for review from the co-ordinating RWA. Applicants must contact the co-ordinating RWAs for any review requests. Any direct requests from applicants to the department will not be accepted and will be referred back to the co-ordinating RWA.

The Review Committee will consider whether the assessment process was undertaken by the RWA according to the published Guidelines and program procedures. The review committee may consider:

- the RWA’s original decision;
- whether the assessment was conducted according to the Program Guidelines
- information provided to the RWAs as part of the Health Workforce Certificate application
- the results of the Committee’s own data analysis, if any; and
- any other matter the Committee considers appropriate.

The Review Committee will provide the applicant with an opportunity to respond with any information that is credible, relevant and significant to the decision.

The Review Committee will notify the applicant and the co-ordinating RWA of its final decision. The co-ordinating RWA will note the outcome of the review on its administrative dataset, and will generate the Health Workforce Certificate if required.

### 1.3.4 Service standards

- **No fees** will be charged to applicants by the RWA for any other service relating to the *Visas for GPs* initiative.
• Majority of applications will receive a response (whether declined, certified, or certified pending provision of practitioner details) within five to ten (5-10) business days from the date of application.

• Following processing time service standards apply:
  o Positions eligible for Automatic Certification – Majority of applications will be processed within two (2) business days.
  o Positions eligible for Expedited Certification – Majority of applications will be processed within two to four (2-4) business days.
  o Positions requiring RWA assessment for certification – Majority of applications will be processed within five to ten (5-10) business days.
  o Positions ‘endorsed pending practitioner details’ – Majority of applications will receive a Health Workforce Certificate within two (2) business days of providing the practitioner’s details to the co-ordinating RWA.

• Applicants referred to the Review Committee will receive a final response within twenty eight (28) working days from the date of referral.

2. Agency responsibilities

2.1 Department of Health

Key responsibilities include:
• Produce communication materials for key stakeholders and standard words relating to the Visas for GPs initiative.
• Provide tools (eg. Assessment Tool), templates, guidelines and other supporting material for RWA administration and assessment activities.
• Receive and respond to referrals from the co-ordinating RWA to the Review Committee.
• Provide periodic data and ad-hoc reports to Home Affairs, for validation, progress monitoring and issues management purposes.
• Receive periodic data and ad-hoc reports from Home Affairs, for progress monitoring and issues management purposes.
• Provide progress updates, communiques and ad-hoc advice to RWAs and other key stakeholders, including responses to media enquiries relating to the Visas for GPs initiative.
• Receive periodic and ad-hoc data reports to from RWAs.

2.2 Department of Home Affairs

Key responsibilities include:
• Ensure relevant online, print and other information resources direct prospective employer sponsors of visas for medical practitioners to DoctorConnect.
• Receive and process position certifications (PDFs) in accordance with Visas for GPs specifications.
• Provide periodic and ad-hoc data to the Department of Health for progress monitoring and issues management purposes.
• Provide funding for all co-ordinating RWA and RWA assessment activities for Visas for GPs initiative, in accordance with related funding agreements.

2.3 Applicants (Employers and recruitment agents)

Key responsibilities include:
• Complete and submit application forms with correct information, including practitioner details when available.
• If the nominated position is certified, provide the Health Workforce Certificate to Home Affairs with employer sponsored visa nomination application within the time period advised on the document, ensuring all details provided in the nomination (e.g. employer name, practitioner name etc.) are consistent with those in the Health Workforce Certificate.
• Seek advice from the co-ordinating RWA if any details relating to the nominated position change prior to submitting the nomination application for an employer sponsored visa, and submit a new Health workforce Certificate application if required.

2.4 Co-ordinating RWA

Key responsibilities include:
• Contribute to development of Visas for GPs information resources, templates, guidelines and other supporting material in collaboration with the Department of Health.
• Maintain online hosting of online application forms for Health workforce Certificate.
• Establish and manage the mailbox and the 1800 contact number, for receiving and responding to customer requests and enquiries.
• Receive, document and process applications in a timely manner, according to the Department of Health’s specifications.
• Issue Health Workforce Certificates to eligible nominated positions.
• Refer, co-ordinate and support the assessing RWA’s assessment activities.
• Produce and maintain administrative data according to the Department of Health’s specifications.
• Provide periodic and ad-hoc data reports to the Department of Health.
• Provide advice and assistance to ‘declined’ applicants as required.
• Refer Health Workforce Certificate applicants requesting a review of a decision to the Department of Health, along with required documentation, e.g. correspondence, supporting evidence, and related information.

2.5 Assessing RWAs

Key responsibilities include:
• Receive position assessment tasks from the co-ordinating RWA.
• Conduct position assessments using the Assessment Tool and guidelines provided by the Department of Health.
• Document assessment outcomes and recommendations according to guidelines.
• Provide recommendations and advice to the co-ordinating RWA in the specified format, in a timely manner.
• Respond to stakeholder enquiries using standard communication materials, or refer enquiries to the co-ordinating RWA.
• Contribute to RWA workshops, forums and/or consultations conducted by the Department of Health in relation to the *Visas for GPs* initiative

3. Evaluation
Quarterly Reports will be provided to the Department of Health by the co-ordinating RWA at the end of each quarter for the four years covered by the grant activity.

Additionally, regular and ongoing monitoring of visa applications and grants data will be undertaken at Home Affairs and relevant data will be provided to the Department of Health to inform the evaluation of the *Visas for GPs* policy initiative. There will be an internal early evaluation of implementation (in 2018-19) followed by an external evaluation after a year of operation (in 2019-20).

A final report from the co-ordinating RWA on operations of the grant activity will be provided to the Department of Health at the end of the grant activity in 2021-22 PY.

4. Privacy
Employer and practitioner information will be collected by the co-ordinating RWA for the purpose of determining eligibility for position certification, and for administration of the *Visas for GPs* initiative. Personal information will be shared with other bodies responsible for the *Visas for GPs* initiative including the Department of Health, Department of Home Affairs and the network of RWAs. This information may also be used for monitoring and the evaluation of the initiative. All collected personal information is protected by law under the *Privacy Act 1988*. 