

URGENT ACTION ON NEWCASTLE SETTLEMENT SERVICES FOLLOWING INDEPENDENT REVIEW

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The Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Chris Bowen MP and Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Senator Kate Lundy, have today put Newcastle settlement service providers on notice following the findings of an independent review into refugee support in the region.

Mr Bowen said following concerns from the local community and the Federal Member for Newcastle, Sharon Grierson, Ernst and Young was commissioned to conduct an audit and look into allegations of substandard housing as part of settlement support.

The Ernst and Young report raised some very serious issues about settlement services in the Newcastle region, including the actions of contractors Navitas and Resolve FM, as well as departmental practices that may have contributed to the problems.

Australia's refugees settlement services have been recognised as some of the best in the world, but it's clearly not the case here – these findings are unacceptable and decisive action needs to be taken.

Resolve FM has been notified that the Department has reserved its right to take further action subject to the findings of the forensic audit that has been ordered. This could include replacing Resolve FM with another provider should such action be necessary and appropriate.

It is extremely disappointing that some refugees in Newcastle have been receiving substandard services. This is completely unacceptable and this has been made very clear to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and the contractors.

The department has also taken immediate steps to address the settlement issues in the Hunter region and elsewhere, in line with the recommendations made by Ernst and Young.

To help ensure the robustness of the new settlement service contracts, Professor David Richmond AO has been asked to conduct an independent review into the adequacy of the performance measures and framework, as well as the department's contract management processes.

We have moved quickly to arrange for the relocation of people in inappropriate residences and to inspect all accommodation provided to clients in the area. Allegations of theft have already been referred to the NSW Police.

There will also be a forensic audit of financial management under the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy contract to identify any inappropriate charges or overcharging of refugee families related to rent, utilities and property insurance.

The contractors are on notice about the expected standards of service provision. The Government needs to be assured that vulnerable humanitarian clients are receiving the appropriate settlement support and contract requirements are being met.

The department is also redesigning its contract management processes to improve scrutiny of services and will be reviewing accommodation arrangements in other regions to ensure there are not more widespread issues.

People accessing settlement services that want further information, or may have concerns or questions, can call 133 177.

The Ernst and Young report can be found at: www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/settle/index.htm