



Australian Government

Department of Health

**VISAS FOR GPS: TARGETING
AREAS OF DOCTOR
SHORTAGES
PROGRAM GUIDELINES**

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Introduction

The Visas for General Practitioners (GPs) Program 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 Program 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 Program is to manage the growth of Australia's medical workforce by regulating the number of overseas doctors working in the primary health care sector in major cities; and redirecting them to areas where they are most needed (i.e. regional, rural and remote areas).

As part of the Visas for GPs Program, the Visas for General Practitioners: Targeting areas of doctor shortages policy initiative was announced as a 2018-19 Budget Measure. The initiative commenced on 11 March 2019. The initiative will reduce the growth in the number of overseas doctors entering the primary health care workforce in well-served major capital cities by around 200 each year from 2018-19 to 2021-22. Building on the Visas for GPs initiative, the Better Distribution of Medical Practitioners 2019-20 Budget measure was announced in May 2019. Commencing on 1 July 2019, this measure will achieve a further reduction of 155 overseas doctors annually in well-served major capital cities from 2019-20 through to 2022-23.

1 Implementation

The Visas for GPs Program has been implemented through the introduction of changed processes for Employer Sponsored (ES) visas in the Skilled Migration Program. Employers seeking to engage certain medical practitioners via an ES visa, to fill a primary health care position, are required to obtain endorsement for the position from the co-ordinating Rural Workforce Agency (HR Plus Tasmania).

Since the commencement of the Visas for GPs Program, Rural Workforce Agency (RWA) endorsement has been required to fill nominated positions with an overseas doctor through ES visas 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.

Employers (including hospital employers) are required to attach a HWC to their nomination application for employer sponsored visas including:

- Temporary Skill Shortage (TSS) (subclass 482) visa
- Skilled Employer Sponsored Regional (Provisional) (subclass 494) visa
- Employer Nomination Scheme (ENS) (subclass 186) visa
- Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS) (subclass 187) visa.

A visa will not be granted if an employer does not include a HWC in the visa nomination application to the Department of Home Affairs.

Endorsement for a position will be provided in the form of a Health Workforce Certificate – a letter issued by HR Plus Tasmania 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.

The Department of Health engages RWAs to administer the Program in accordance with the Commonwealth Grants Rules and Guidelines 2017. Positions for overseas doctors in geographic locations where there is not an identified need for additional primary health care

services will not be issued with a Health Workforce Certificate by HR Plus Tasmania. Without a Health Workforce Certificate for a nominated position, the nomination application cannot be approved and the related visa cannot be granted.

1.1 Scope

Under the Visas for GPs Program, the Department of Home Affairs requires employers to obtain a Health Workforce Certificate for all ES visa nominations in the three specified ANZSCO occupation codes. The Visas for GPs Program targets medical professionals looking to work in Australia's primary health care sector. Under this Program, employer nominated positions for filling by overseas doctors to deliver primary health care services in 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 Program:

Table 1: Eligibility for automatic or expedited certification

Occupation Code	Service type	Practitioner	Certification
All three occupations (253111; 253112; 253999)	Hospital-based service	Any	Automatic ¹
All three occupations (253111; 253112; 253999)	Aboriginal Medical Service	Any	Expedited ²
All three occupations (253111; 253112; 253999)	Any	ES visa required for an overseas doctor's continuing employment in a position in the same location with the same employer	Expedited ²
All three occupations (253111; 253112; 253999)	Any	ES visa required for an Australian-qualified overseas doctor	Expedited ²
All three occupations (253111; 253112; 253999)	Approved Medical Deputising Service	Any	Expedited ²

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 are issued with a Health Workforce Certificate by the HR Plus Tasmania automatically or in an expedited manner. All other positions 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 recommends to HR Plus Tasmania that a Health Workforce Certificate be issued for the nominated position. HR Plus Tasmania then issues the Health Workforce Certificate to the employer.

If the assessing RWA determines that the position is not located in an area in need of additional primary health care services, the RWA recommends to HR Plus Tasmania that a Health Workforce Certificate be declined. HR Plus Tasmania acts 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, HR Plus Tasmania may issue a Health Workforce Certificate to an applicant without the assessing RWA's endorsement of the position. These circumstances may include acting on recommendations of the Visas for GPs Review Committee (see [1.3.3 – Review of decisions](#)) or where the Department of Health advises that circumstances have changed since the last update to the Department of Health's Assessment Tool data (see [1.2 - How will it work in practice?](#)).

1.2 How will it work in practice?

The objective of the Visas for GPs Program is to reduce the number of overseas doctors entering the primary health care system in well-serviced major capital cities and metropolitan areas, by around 200 in 2018-19 and then by a further 155 annually from 2019-20 through to 2022-23, and to direct the flow of overseas doctors to areas most in need of primary health care services. This does not entirely prevent the issuing of any ES visas for overseas doctors in major metropolitan centres as position assessments would also be informed by considerations such as the Distribution Priority Area (DPA) classification of the location.

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

The Department of Health will provide ongoing guidance to HR Plus Tasmania on position certification decision-making criteria, to ensure the objectives of the Program are met.

1.3 Process for certification

The Department of Health's Visas for GPs Program communication strategy directs prospective employers, recruitment agents and other stakeholders to the DoctorConnect website. The Department of Home Affairs website also directs prospective employers and recruitment agents to the [DoctorConnect](#) webpage on the health website.

The DoctorConnect website provides prospective employers and recruitment agents with information about the Visas for GPs Program, links to the [Visas for GPs website](#) (www.visasforgps.com.au) for online application forms, the Visas for GPs advice line and contact details for further advice.

The Visas for GPs website, advice line and mailbox is hosted by HR Plus Tasmania.

HR Plus Tasmania, as the co-ordinating RWA, performs the public-facing customer service functions for the Program, and co-ordinates the activities of the assessing RWAs. HR Plus Tasmania reviews applications to determine whether the position specified in the applications are subject to an assessment by a RWA under the Visas for GPs Program. For positions that are not subject to a RWA assessment and are eligible for an automatic and/or expedited certification (Table 1)¹, HR Plus Tasmania issues Health Workforce Certificates in an expedited manner.

Employers and recruitment agents (applicants) must complete an online form available from the [Visas for GPs website](#) (www.visasforgps.com.au) to obtain certification of a nominated position/s. Alternatively, applicants can request an electronically fillable application form to complete and submit to visasforgps@hrplustas.com.au. Applicants can contact HR Plus on 1800 022 000 or via email at visasforgps@hrplustas.com.au for further information, to seek clarification on the Visas for GPs Program or to request an Application Form via email.

HR Plus Tasmania refers relevant applications to assessing RWAs for assessment. Assessing RWAs conduct position assessments and provide recommendations on

¹ As the majority of these applications are submitted by State and Territory Government employers, streamlined processing will apply to ensure automatic certification is provided for nominated positions.

certification eligibility to HR Plus Tasmania who then issues a Health Workforce Certificate for eligible positions based on the assessing RWAs' recommendations.

In some cases, employers may seek certification for a position in which a medical practitioner has not yet been identified. In these cases, HR Plus Tasmania refers the application to the relevant RWA for assessment as the assessing 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, HR Plus Tasmania advises the applicant of the position's eligibility as 'endorsed pending practitioner details'. However, a Health Workforce Certificate will not be issued until a practitioner has been identified for the position and their details provided to HR Plus Tasmania². The interim endorsement will expire six months after the notification date.

HR Plus Tasmania issues Health Workforce Certificates for all eligible positions and advises Health Workforce Certificate applicants via email and provides the Health Workforce Certificate as a PDF attachment.

HR Plus Tasmania also advises Health Workforce Certificate applicants of the outcome of unsuccessful applications via email. This email may offer applicants, and/or the overseas doctors they want to recruit, options to access further advice and support from RWAs. Advice from HR Plus Tasmania on options for further advice and assistance is a separate service to the Visas for GPs Program.

HR Plus Tasmania also refers requests for a review of the position assessment decision to the Department of Health.

1.3.1 RWA position assessments

In the interests of fairness and transparency, a standard approach to RWA position assessments is applied consistently across all jurisdictions.

Assessing RWAs are provided with training and guidelines for using the Department of Health's Assessment Tool to identify the characteristics of the GP catchment in which the position is located.

The Department of Health also provides position assessment guidelines setting out parameters and thresholds for determining a position's eligibility for certification according to a GP catchment's characteristics.

Assessing RWAs are required to consistently follow the guidelines when performing the Assessment Tool informed position assessments. Assessing RWAs are required to use the Assessment Tool for an evidence-based approach to identify genuine need for additional primary health care services in a GP catchment where patients are accessing general practice services (see the Assessment Tool Factsheet for more information).

An assessment of a position in a given location using the Assessment Tool will be based on the characteristics of a GP catchment. GP catchment characteristics such as the catchment size; the number of dedicated GPs and number of GP practices in the catchment; GP to population ratio; GP over-capacity; service complexity; the level of socio-economic disadvantage, the types of services available; Modified Monash Model (MM) classification of the actual position location; the demographics of patients and providers; and whether there is a public emergency department are important considerations that assessing RWAs are required to consider when performing an assessment. The Distribution Priority Area (DPA) classification of the actual location of the nominated position is also an important consideration.

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 Visas for GPs Program, and to ensure that details in the Health Workforce Certificate match those in the employer sponsored visa nomination provided to the Department of Home Affairs.

For assessments of positions in MM 1 areas, assessing RWAs rely on the Assessment Tool to assess a nominated position by evaluating criteria specified in the Assessment Tool. Final outcome for MM 1 GP catchments will be informed by consideration of GP catchment characteristics in the Assessment Tool including the DPA considerations. The assessing RWA will not apply any further criteria in providing their recommendation to HR Plus Tasmania. HR Plus Tasmania makes the final decision in accordance with the guidelines and, where provided, advice from the Department of Health.

For assessments of positions in MM 2-7 areas, assessing RWAs are able to also apply their local knowledge and workforce planning expertise where relevant, in addition to using the Assessment Tool.

A provision was previously put in place for employers and practices who had made arrangements to contract an overseas doctor prior to the commencement of the Program on 11 March 2019. This enabled employers and practices to receive a Health Workforce Certificate on production of a signed contract or letter of offer showing agreement from both parties prior to the Program commencement date. This provision ended on 30 June 2019.

Sample RWA assessment task

Table 2 presents an example of a position assessment referred to an assessing RWA by HR Plus Tasmania.

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 HR Plus Tasmania. Note that 'Assessment Tool outcome' and 'Recommendation' are separate fields, allowing assessing RWAs to depart from the Assessment Tool outcome where needed. Assessing RWAs are required to provide a brief rationale for the recommendation.

Table 2: Position assessment

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

1.3.2 Communication and documentation

Visas for GPs communication materials are provided by the Department of Health to RWAs. RWAs will also be provided with 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 Program. These materials, including any approved corporate branding for the Program, may be used on RWAs' websites and in their correspondence, to communicate with stakeholders about the Program.

Standard Application Form

HR Plus Tasmania provides an online form for Health Workforce Certificate applicants to complete and submit. An electronically fillable Standard Application Form for Health Workforce Certificate applicants is available on request. A link to the online form is available from the DoctorConnect website.

The Standard Application Form includes advice to applicants regarding the privacy and security of information, and advice regarding the provision of false or misleading information.

Note: A Standard Application Form allows nomination of only one position for certification.

Hospital-based Positions Application Form

HR Plus Tasmania provides an online form for easy completion and submission. An electronically fillable Hospital-based Position Application Form for Health Workforce Certificate applicants is available on request. A link to the online form is available from the DoctorConnect website.

The Hospital-based Position Application Form allows state and territory health departments and private hospital administrators to nominate multiple positions using one application form. This provides for an efficient process given the bulk recruitment practices in place for many hospital-based positions.

Health Workforce Certificate

HR Plus Tasmania issues Health Workforce Certificates to applicants via email, in the form of a PDF attachment. Employers are required to include this certificate (the PDF document) when submitting their employer sponsor visa nomination application to the Department of Home Affairs. Health Workforce Certificate PDF documents are issued in a standard format according to the Department of Home Affairs' specifications.

The Health Workforce Certificate needs to be lodged with the Department of Home Affairs within six months of its issue date. The Health Workforce Certificate specifies the date it needs to be lodged by with the Department of Home Affairs.

Health Workforce Certificates cannot be changed except for administrative errors. All requests for amendments must be lodged with HR Plus Tasmania in writing. If an incorrect occupation code has been nominated in the application, a new application will need to be lodged with the correct occupation code.

Issued Health Workforce Certificates can only be renewed once (for a further 6 month period) in the event of expiry prior to lodging an ES visa nomination application with the Department of Home Affairs.

Declined applications

For declined Health Workforce Certificate applications, HR Plus Tasmania advises Health Workforce Certificate applicants via email. This advice will include reasons for the decision and options available to applicants.

Data items

HR Plus Tasmania is required to document and maintain the administrative dataset generated by Visas for GPs Program activities, including the applicant/employer, position

and practitioner information from application forms, and other information including details of application outcomes and reasons for the decisions to (or not to) issue a Health Workforce Certificate.

1.3.3 Review of decisions

Applicants may request a review of a decision by the Department of Health's Visas for GPs Review Committee (the Review Committee). The Review Committee reviews original decisions and can confirm decisions or substitute those with new decisions. In cases where an applicant queries or disputes a decision to not issue a Health Workforce Certificate, HR Plus Tasmania is required to maintain a record of all correspondence with the applicant and provide this, and other documents related to the original assessment, to the Department of Health.

The applicant must notify HR Plus Tasmania in writing if they wish to have a decision reviewed. HR Plus Tasmania will then refer their request to the Review Committee. The Department of Health will only receive requests for review from HR Plus Tasmania. Any direct requests from applicants to the Department of Health will not be accepted and will be referred back to HR Plus Tasmania. The Department of Health will email the review applicant to acknowledge the receipt of the review applications referred to them. Review applicants are able to make subsequent contacts directly with the Department of Health through a specified email address provided to them.

The Review Committee will consider whether the assessment process was undertaken by the RWA according to the published Program 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;
- additional information provided by the applicant in the review request;
- the results of the Review Committee's own data analysis, if any; and
- any other matter the Review Committee considers relevant.

The Review Committee may request additional information from the RWA regarding the location of the practice, this includes in MM 1 areas.

The Department of Health works towards providing a response to review applicants within 30 business days. The Review Committee notifies applicants and HR Plus Tasmania of its final decision. HR Plus Tasmania will note the outcome of reviews on its administrative dataset, and issue a Health Workforce Certificate if directed to by the Department of Health. (See: Health Workforce Certificate Review Process)

1.3.4 Service standards

- No fees are charged to applicants by the RWAs for any service relating to the Visas for GPs Program.
- A majority of applications to 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.
- The following processing time service standards apply:
 - Positions eligible for Automatic Certification – Majority of applications to be processed within two (2) business days.
 - Positions eligible for Expedited Certification – Majority of applications to be processed within two to four (2-4) business days.

- Positions requiring RWA assessment for certification – Majority of applications to be processed within five to ten (5-10) business days.
- Positions ‘endorsed pending practitioner details’ – Majority of applications to receive a Health Workforce Certificate within two (2) business days of providing the practitioner’s details to HR Plus Tasmania.
- Applicants referred to the Review Committee will generally receive a final response within thirty (30) business days from the date of referral.

2 Agency responsibilities

2.1 Department of Health

Key responsibilities include:

- Produce communication materials for key stakeholders relating to the Visas for GPs Program.
- Provide tools (e.g. Assessment Tool), templates, guidelines and other supporting material for RWA administration and assessment activities.
- Receive and respond to referrals from HR Plus Tasmania to the Review Committee.
- Provide funding for all HR Plus Tasmania and assessing RWA activities for the Visas for GPs Program, in accordance with established funding agreements.
- Provide periodic data and ad-hoc reports to the Department of Home Affairs, for validation, progress monitoring and issues management purposes.
- Receive periodic data and ad-hoc reports from the Department of 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 Program.
- Receive periodic and ad-hoc data reports on Visas for GPs Program activity from RWAs.

2.2 Department of Home Affairs

Key responsibilities include:

- Ensure that relevant online, print and other information sources direct prospective employer sponsors of visas for overseas doctors to *DoctorConnect*.
- Receive and process Health Workforce Certificates in accordance with Visas for GPs Program specifications.
- Provide periodic and ad-hoc data to the Department of Health for progress monitoring and issue management purposes.

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 the Department of Home Affairs with an ES visa nomination application within the time period advised on the Certificate, ensuring all details provided in the nomination application (e.g. employer name, practitioner name etc.) are consistent with those in the Health Workforce Certificate.

- Seek advice from HR Plus Tasmania if any details relating to the nominated position change prior to submitting the nomination application for an ES visa, and submit a new Health workforce Certificate application if required.

2.4 HR Plus Tasmania.

Key responsibilities include:

- Contribute to the development of Visas for GPs Program information resources, templates, guidelines and other supporting material in collaboration with the Department of Health.
- Maintain hosting of online application forms for Health workforce Certificates.
- Establish and manage a mailbox and a 1800 contact number, for receiving and responding to information requests and enquiries.
- Receive, document and process applications in a timely manner, according to the Service Standards listed at 1.3.4 above.
- Issue Health Workforce Certificates for 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 related to the Visas for GPs Program to 'declined' applicants as required.
- Refer Health Workforce Certificate applicants requesting a review of a decision to the Department of Health, along with documentation including the original application form; correspondence; supporting evidence; and any related information, required, or requested, by the Review Committee.

2.5 Assessing RWAs

Key responsibilities include:

- Receive position assessment tasks from HR Plus Tasmania.
- Conduct position assessments using the Assessment Tool and guidelines provided by the Department of Health.
- Document assessment outcomes and recommendations according to the Program Guidelines.
- Provide recommendations and advice to HR Plus Tasmania in the specified format and in a timely manner.
- Respond to stakeholder enquiries using Visas for GPs communication materials, or refer enquiries to HR Plus Tasmania.
- Contribute to RWA workshops, forums and/or consultations conducted by the Department of Health in relation to the Visas for GPs Program.

3 Evaluation

Quarterly Reports will be provided to the Department of Health by HR Plus Tasmania at the end of each quarter in the period covered by the grant activity for the Visas for GPs Program.

Additionally, regular and ongoing monitoring of visa applications and grants data will be undertaken by the Department of Home Affairs and relevant data is to be provided to the Department of Health to inform the evaluation of the Visas for GPs Program. An internal evaluation of the implementation of the Visas for GPs Program will be conducted in 2019-20. An external evaluation will be conducted in mid to late 2020, approximately one year after the implementation of the Program.

A final report from HR Plus Tasmania on operations of the grant activity will be provided to the Department of Health at the end of the grant activity.

4 Privacy

Employer and practitioner information is to be collected by HR Plus Tasmania for the purpose of determining eligibility for Health Workforce Certificates, and for administration of the Visas for GPs Program only. Personal information will be shared with other bodies responsible for the Visas for GPs Program including the Department of Health, the Department of Home Affairs and the network of RWAs. This information may also be used for monitoring and the evaluation of the Visas for GPs Program. All collected personal information is protected by law under the *Privacy Act 1988*.