



1. INVESTMENT CONCEPT NOTE¹

Investment Concept Title: Australian Volunteers Program (2027-2035)

Start Date: mid 2027

End Date: 30 June 2031 + up to 4 years extension(s)

Total Proposed Funding: up to \$350 million over eight years. This comprises \$305 million in core program funding, with provision of up to a further \$45 million in co-funding from DFAT Posts or bilateral programs that may wish to support additional volunteer deployments or priority assignments.

Proposed design pathway: Standard

Quality Assurance: Independent appraisal, formal peer review

Development Context (What is the problem?)

Across the 26 countries in which the Australian Volunteer Program (AVP) currently operates, development contexts vary widely, but partner countries continue to face significant capacity, resource and institutional constraints across sectors central to inclusive and sustainable development. These include health, education, law and justice, governance, civil society, climate resilience, community development, disability inclusion, gender equality, livelihoods and private sector development.

Australia responds to these priorities through a broad set of bilateral, regional and global investments, aligned with partner government priorities and Australia's development and foreign policy objectives. AVP complements these investments by working directly with the organisations and systems that deliver development outcomes. Through skilled volunteering, the program can provide practical support to government agencies, civil society organisations, education and health institutions, community organisations, and other local partners seeking to strengthen their capability and deliver on their own mandates.

The strategic context for the next phase of the AVP has shifted significantly. The Indo-Pacific is facing increased pressure on development financing, climate shocks, demographic change and persistent inequalities that affect the stability, resilience and prosperity of the region. Climate change remains a shared threat facing the region, with Pacific Island countries already experiencing extreme temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, rising sea levels and more frequent or intense climate events. Women, people with disability and other marginalised groups also continue to face structural barriers to participation, leadership, services and economic opportunity. These challenges reinforce the need for development approaches that are locally led, relational and able to work through the institutions, systems and communities that shape people's lives.

AVP is a distinctive contributor to Australia's development and foreign policy objectives because it places skilled Australians alongside partner organisations in ways that build capability, trust and enduring relationships. The program supports partner organisations to pursue their own development priorities, while strengthening Australians' understanding of the region and demonstrating Australia's practical commitment to its partners. In the current environment, this combination of people-to-people connection, development outcomes, and public diplomacy is increasingly important.

¹ Revised to reflect the current stage of design consultations, noting the design process is ongoing and may result in a final design that differs from this Note.

Proposed Investment

Since the 1960s, Australian volunteering has supported change across the region by matching skilled Australians with partner organisations in developing countries. The current phase of AVP operates across 26 countries, supported by 21 in-country offices, and, since 2017, has sent 2234 Australians to support more than 1200 government, civil society, private sector, education, health, climate, disability and community organisations. The program is now approaching the end of its current ten-year phase and a new investment is required for 2027–2035.

The next phase provides an opportunity to refresh the strategic intent of the Program. The next iteration of the Program will seek to be flexible to the geostrategic environment, aligned with Australian and partner priorities, and efficient in delivery to maximise volunteer assignments targeting key geographic and sector priorities within budget allocations. The proposed investment will retain the core strengths of Australian volunteering of locally led assignment design, partner capability, volunteer service and long-term relationships, while positioning the program to respond to contemporary priorities. This is expected to include a larger and more diverse volunteer cohort, improved country portfolio planning, more deliberate public diplomacy and domestic engagement, enhanced alumni and Australian partnership functions, and continued integration of climate resilience, gender equality, disability and social inclusion. The design may consider countries of engagement and make recommendations or provide guidance on appropriate geographic spread for the next phase of the program.

Strategic Intent and Rationale

The Australian Volunteers Program is a distinctive instrument of Australia's development cooperation. Its purpose is to strengthen people-to-people links, support partner organisations to achieve their own development objectives, and contribute to stronger bilateral relationships across the Indo-Pacific and selected countries beyond the region. Through skilled volunteering, AVP places Australians alongside partner organisations in ways that build capability, foster mutual understanding and demonstrate Australia's practical commitment to locally led development. The Program is guided by, and contributes to, Australia's International Development Policy, International Gender Equality Strategy, Disability Equity and Rights Strategy, Locally Led Development policy, and the Sustainable Development Goals.

AVP's value lies in its combination of development contribution, relationship-building and visibility of Australian support. Volunteers are a highly visible element of Australia's development cooperation program and are valued by partner organisations and host governments for the practical support they provide. Returned volunteers also contribute to Australia's public understanding of development and the region, through alumni networks, professional relationships and ongoing links with partner organisations. This gives AVP a role that extends beyond individual assignments: it helps build Australia's regional literacy, strengthens enduring institutional and personal relationships, and supports domestic awareness of Australia's international engagement.

The Program complements other Australian investments, including the New Colombo Plan and Australia Awards, by engaging Australians at different stages of their professional lives. While the New Colombo Plan supports undergraduate mobility and Australia Awards supports future leaders from partner countries, AVP provides opportunities for skilled and experienced Australians and, in the next phase, potentially young professionals, to contribute directly to partner-led development priorities. These experiences can deepen cultural, educational, professional and economic links between Australia and partner countries.

The next phase will continue to be informed by country priorities, Post engagement and partner organisation demand. AVP Country Program Plans will remain an important mechanism for aligning assignments with Development Partnership Plans and Australia's bilateral priorities, while preserving AVP's locally led and demand-driven character.

Climate resilience, gender equality, disability equity and rights, First Nations engagement, locally led development, diaspora and a focus on youth will be central to the next phase. Rather than treating these as separate considerations to be applied at the end of assignment design, the program will seek to embed them in country planning, partner selection, assignment development, volunteer preparation, monitoring and learning.

Climate-relevant assignments will be strengthened where there is clear partner demand and technical fit. Gender equality and disability inclusion will be pursued both through targeted partnerships and through mainstreamed expectations across the portfolio. The Indigenous Pathways Program and related First Nations engagement will continue to be developed in ways that support respectful exchange, mutual learning and Australia's First Nations foreign policy objectives.

The design is also exploring the value of new or expanded areas of focus, including young professional volunteers, diaspora engagement, sport, climate, and First Nations engagement. To ensure cohesion, any new or expanded area of focus will sit within the core AVP model rather than operating as disconnected sub-programs. The design will also clearly articulate the enabling functions that underpin quality volunteering, including assignment design, partner readiness assessment, safeguarding, volunteer support, strategic communications, alumni engagement, Australian partnerships, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), DFAT Post engagement and adaptive management.

Overall, the next phase of AVP will retain the core strengths of Australian volunteering while positioning the program to deliver greater strategic value. It will remain grounded in locally led partner demand, while being more deliberate about how volunteer assignments contribute to people-to-people links, partner capability, public diplomacy, Australian community engagement and Australia's broader development and foreign policy objectives.

Lessons Learned

DFAT has commissioned two independent evaluations over the life of the current Program, in 2021 and 2025. These evaluations found that AVP remains relevant, effective and valued, with the core volunteering model continuing to support partner organisations to progress their development objectives and build enduring people-to-people links. The evaluations also identified areas where the next phase should strengthen the Program's strategic alignment, visibility, risk management and learning. Key lessons for the next design include:

- › Refreshing the Program logic to better articulate AVP's contribution to development outcomes, people-to-people links, public diplomacy and Australia's bilateral relationships.
- › Strengthening country-level planning and coordination between Posts, DFAT Canberra and the implementing partner.
- › Building on successful Australian strategic partnerships, which the 2021 evaluation found had supported sustainable capacity development outcomes in sectors including health, climate action, agriculture and inclusive economic growth.
- › Documenting and learning from innovation, including the Innovation Fund/Hub, impact grants and the Indigenous Pathways Program.

These lessons are informing the emerging design direction for the next phase of AVP. The new investment will seek to preserve the strengths of the current volunteering model while strengthening country portfolio planning, public diplomacy, partner engagement, Australian partnerships, innovation, MEL and risk management.

Success

The Program will be regarded as successful if:

1. Partner organisations are better able to achieve their own development objectives through high-quality, locally led volunteer assignments.
2. Australia's bilateral relationships with host countries are strengthened through trusted, practical and sustained people-to-people engagement.
3. Public Diplomacy supports in-country and in-Australia program visibility, and diplomacy objectives.
4. AVP makes demonstrable contributions to GEDSI, climate resilience and First Nations foreign policy priorities through its country portfolios, partnerships and assignments.

5. Volunteers and partner organisations report high levels of satisfaction with the quality, relevance and support provided through assignments.
6. AVP increases the number of Australians, including young professionals, with regional literacy, cross-cultural capability and ongoing commitment to international development and engagement.
7. The Program scales safely and credibly, with the systems, staffing and safeguards needed to maintain quality, partner confidence and Australia’s reputation.

Proposed Outcomes and Investment Options (What?)

The proposed Program Logic builds on lessons learned from previous phases of the AVP and responds to DFAT’s expectation that the next phase deliver across three connected dimensions: people-to-people links, development contribution, and public diplomacy.

Annex A shows a working version of the program logic, which is being tested and refined through the design process. The final Goal, Objective, End of Program Outcomes (EOPOs) and intermediate outcomes are being refined through consultation and will be confirmed in the Investment Design Document.

Table 1: Draft Program Logic

| Objective Hierarchy | Description |
|---------------------|--|
| Goal | Communities across the Indo-Pacific live in a more connected, resilient, secure and prosperous region, supported by strong partnerships with Australia. |
| Objective | To strengthen Australia’s partnerships with Indo-Pacific countries through locally led volunteering and exchange that supports shared development priorities, builds enduring people-to-people relationships, deepens regional understanding, and strengthens visible recognition of Australia’s contribution to a connected, resilient, secure and prosperous region. |
| EOPO1 | Volunteering and exchange partnerships strengthen partner organisations’ capability to deliver their mandates and advance locally led development priorities. |
| EOPO2 | Participants from Australia and partner countries enjoy enduring professional, cultural and personal connections and networks that deepen mutual understanding, trust and long-term engagement. |
| EOPO3 | AVP volunteer and exchange experiences, relationships and results are credible and visible to partner-country communities, governments and Australian audiences, raising their awareness of, and engagement with, Australia’s contribution to the Indo-Pacific region. |

These EOPOs are mutually reinforcing. Strong partner capability generates credible results and stories; sustained relationships build the networks through which Australia’s contribution is understood; and greater visibility strengthens recognition of the value of volunteering and Australia’s development cooperation. The design therefore treats public diplomacy and visibility not as incidental benefits of the Program, but as objectives that require deliberate resourcing, communications systems, Post engagement and measurement.

Design directions being tested

The design process is testing a set of directions that will shape the next phase of AVP. These directions operate at different levels of the program architecture: some relate to the core volunteering model that should be sustained; some are cross-cutting priorities to be embedded across country portfolios and assignments; and some are proposed areas of new or expanded focus. The design is carefully considering the overall mix of these directions to ensure the program remains cohesive, strategically focused and realistic in how it deploys resources across different priority areas.

- › **Sustaining the core skilled volunteering model will remain central to the next phase.** The design will continue to prioritise skilled and experienced Australian volunteers working with partner organisations on locally identified priorities. Health and education are expected to remain important areas of engagement, reflecting their strong performance in the current program, sustained partner demand, and the value of established Australian professional and institutional partnerships in these sectors. The next phase will seek to preserve the strengths of the current model while seeking to improve assignment quality, country portfolio planning, partner engagement and strategic alignment.
- › **Gender equality, disability equity and social inclusion** will remain central to the Program. The next design will be informed by GEDSI analysis and will build on existing AVP strategies and practice. This will include both mainstreaming GEDSI across the Program and pursuing targeted partnerships with organisations working on gender equality, disability rights and inclusion.
- › **Climate change and disaster resilience** will be strengthened in the next phase. The design is testing how climate risks and opportunities can be more systematically integrated into country planning, partner engagement and assignment design. This may include targeted climate-relevant assignments where there is clear partner demand and technical fit, as well as broader expectations that assignments consider climate risks and opportunities where relevant.
- › **First Nations engagement, including the Indigenous Pathways Program**, will continue to be considered as a distinctive area of value for AVP. The design will explore how First Nations perspectives, knowledge and relationships can be supported through culturally safe and properly resourced approaches, including where there is partner demand for exchange in areas such as land and sea management, environmental governance, sport, education, leadership and community development.
- › **Targeted engagement of young Australian professionals** is being explored in the design process. Under this approach, more early-career Australians, generally aged up to 35 years, would undertake in-country assignments that are identified in response to partner demand and specifically scoped to suit early-career skills, experience and supervision needs. These assignments would contribute to partner priorities while also building long-term regional literacy, people-to-people links and public diplomacy value. The emerging proposition is for a national cohort to be deployed per year, supported by state-based departure events, with assignments identified through country portfolio planning and selected on the basis of partner demand, Post interest, safety, and suitability for early-career volunteers.
- › **Diaspora engagement, sport, skilled trades and intra-Pacific volunteering** are also being tested as potential areas of focus within the next phase. These areas may offer value where they respond to partner demand, strengthen people-to-people links, support Australian public diplomacy, and can be delivered safely and credibly within the broader AVP model.
- › **Geographic footprint is being reviewed through the design.** AVP currently operates across the Indo-Pacific and Africa, with the large majority of assignments in the Indo-Pacific and a smaller component in Africa. The next phase is considering whether the current country footprint remains appropriate, and what criteria should guide decisions about expansion, consolidation or changes to countries of operation. These criteria are likely to include alignment with Australia's development and diplomatic priorities, partner-country demand, Post interest and capacity, safe and effective delivery, potential volunteer numbers, and the cost of maintaining an in-country operating platform.
- › **Australian partnerships and alumni engagement** are recognised as important aspects of the program. Universities, TAFEs, professional bodies, civil society organisations, First Nations organisations, diaspora networks and alumni can strengthen recruitment, technical quality, public diplomacy, return engagement and institutional links between Australia and partner countries. In some sectors, Australian partnerships can extend the value of individual assignments by providing technical backstopping, peer networks, institutional

continuity and post-assignment support to host partner organisations. The design is testing what level of resourcing is required for these functions to contribute meaningfully to the Program's development, people-to-people and visibility outcomes.

- › **Grants and assignment support** are being considered as possible adjuncts to volunteer assignments. Assignment support would provide limited enabling resources directly linked to an approved volunteer assignment, helping the volunteer and partner organisation implement agreed workplans. A small grants mechanism would serve a broader purpose, allowing partner organisations to apply for modest funding to support organisational priorities, small projects or follow-on activities that complement the volunteer partnership and strengthen the organisation's development impact. Any grants mechanism would require stronger governance, fiduciary controls, safeguarding, monitoring and acquittal arrangements.

Implementation Arrangements and Delivery Approach

Contractual model

The next phase of AVP will continue to be delivered through a **managing contractor model**. This remains the most appropriate contractual mechanism for a program of this scale and complexity, allowing DFAT to retain strategic oversight, policy direction and branding control while contracting an external provider to manage the resource-intensive operational functions required to deliver international volunteering safely and effectively.

For the purposes of this concept note, the term **managing contractor** refers to the contracted legal entity and contractual model. The term **implementing partner** is used to describe the organisation, consortium or delivery arrangement responsible for implementing the program. The implementing partner may be a single organisation or a consortium, provided the arrangement offers clear accountability, strong integration across functions, and the capability to manage a complex global volunteering platform.

Core functions are likely to include overall program and contract management, financial management, country portfolio planning, assignment design, partner readiness assessment and ongoing support, volunteer recruitment and mobilisation, safeguarding and duty of care, in-country support, alumni engagement, Australian partnerships, strategic communications, monitoring, evaluation and learning, risk management, grants management, innovation, and strategic coordination with DFAT Canberra and DFAT Posts.

DFAT Management

Canberra-based DFAT staff will continue to be responsible for contract management and strategic oversight of the Program. These staff are currently based in the Humanitarian and Development Section. Dedicated DFAT resources will manage contractual performance, maintain strategic alignment with DFAT policy priorities, engage across relevant areas of the Department, and oversee risk, safeguarding, public diplomacy, MEL and value for money.

The implementing partner should also expect to work directly with DFAT Posts in each country of operation. Posts will play an important role in shaping country priorities, informing Country Program Plans, identifying public diplomacy opportunities, supporting alignment with Development Partnership Plans, and engaging with host governments where appropriate. The level of resourcing available at Posts to engage with AVP will differ by country context, and in many cases will sit within broader development, political, and public diplomacy portfolios rather than dedicated AVP management roles.

The implementing partner will also be expected to engage with DFAT strategic communications and public diplomacy areas, both in Canberra and at Posts. This reflects the expectation that the next phase of AVP will generate stronger Australian visibility, more coherent storytelling, and more deliberate use of volunteer and alumni experiences to support public diplomacy objectives.

The design is exploring whether dedicated program-funded resourcing might be provided to selected priority Posts, and/or whether additional monitoring and travel budgets should be made available to enable deeper Post

engagement with the Program. These options are being tested through the design process and considered in light of the final program architecture, country footprint, public diplomacy expectations and available budget.

Governance arrangements

The next phase will build on current governance arrangements while strengthening mechanisms for strategic direction, risk oversight and country-level alignment. Governance arrangements will need to support decisions on country footprint, sectoral and thematic priorities, volunteer targets, Australian partnerships, communications, and the balance between partner demand, Post priorities and program-wide objectives.

A program advisory or steering mechanism is expected to provide strategic guidance and review performance, risks and emerging priorities. Risk governance will include regular consideration of volunteer safety, safeguarding, PSEAH, child protection, fraud and corruption, partner due diligence, data privacy, reputational risks and program transition risks. GEDSI, climate and First Nations expertise should be available within governance or advisory arrangements to ensure that these commitments are embedded at the strategic level and not treated only as operational compliance requirements.

Country Program Plans, or an equivalent country portfolio planning process, will remain central to implementation. These plans should be used to align assignments with Development Partnership Plans, Post priorities and partner organisation demand, while also providing a clearer basis for monitoring country-level performance, public diplomacy opportunities and portfolio balance.

Program budget

The program value is up to \$350 million over eight years. This comprises \$305 million in core program funding, with provision of up to a further \$45 million in co-funding from DFAT Posts or bilateral programs that may wish to support additional volunteer deployments or priority assignments.

Risks

DFAT has extensive experience administering AVP and the next phase will build on lessons from previous phases, independent evaluations and design consultations.

The Program operates in a complex risk environment because it deploys Australian volunteers across diverse country contexts, works with a wide range of partner organisations, and relies on strong systems for volunteer safety, safeguarding, partner due diligence, financial management, data protection and public diplomacy.

The investment is expected to remain a high-risk program given its scale, geographic spread, duty-of-care obligations and direct engagement with people and communities. Major risk areas include:

- › a critical incident resulting in death, serious injury or serious illness of a volunteer, including where duty-of-care arrangements are found to be inadequate;
- › safeguarding incidents involving volunteers, partner organisations or community members, including child protection and prevention of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment
- › partner organisation non-compliance with safeguarding, child protection, PSEAH or other due diligence requirements;
- › fraud, corruption, bribery, financial mismanagement or failure by the implementing partner or downstream partners to meet contractual obligations;
- › failure to manage expenditure within the allocated budget or to adequately resource the functions required for safe and effective delivery;
- › natural disasters, political instability, security incidents, public health events or climate-related shocks affecting volunteers, partner organisations or country operations;

- › cyber security, data privacy or information management breaches, including in relation to volunteer, alumni, safeguarding or partner organisation records;
- › transition risks from the current phase to the new phase, including disruption to active volunteers, partner relationships, safeguarding records, country knowledge, alumni networks and Australian partnerships;
- › reputational risks to Australia if volunteers, partner organisations, Posts or host governments experience a decline in quality, support, responsiveness or strategic coherence; and
- › failure to deliver on key DFAT priorities, including locally led development, GEDSI, climate resilience, First Nations engagement, public diplomacy and people-to-people links.

The design will include a comprehensive risk assessment and risk management framework. This will consider the additional risk implications of proposed new or expanded cohorts and modalities, including young professionals, diaspora engagement, sport, First Nations engagement, intra-Pacific volunteering, short-term assignments and any grants or assignment support mechanisms. These areas may offer significant value, but will require appropriate safeguards, role design, preparation, supervision, partner readiness assessment and duty-of-care arrangements.

The Statement of Requirements will specify the risk management capability expected of the implementing partner. This is likely to include dedicated safeguarding, security, duty-of-care, fraud control, data protection, MEL and incident management systems, as well as clear escalation protocols with DFAT Canberra and Posts. Tenderers will be expected to demonstrate how they will resource these functions, manage risk across a diverse country footprint, and maintain volunteer welfare, partner confidence and Australia's reputation.

What are the next steps?

The design of the next phase of the Australian Volunteers Program is currently underway. The design team was selected through an open procurement process and is consulting with DFAT Canberra, Posts, partner-governments, partner organisations, volunteers, alumni, Australian partner organisations and other stakeholders to ensure the next phase is strategically aligned, operationally feasible, and informed by lessons from the current program. The final Investment Design Document is expected to be completed in Quarter 3 2026, subject to DFAT review and approval processes.