



COVERSHEET

Minister	Hon Casey Costello	Portfolio	Associate Immigration
Title of Cabinet paper	Establishing a permanent Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship (CORS) pathway	Date to be published	4 August 2026

List of documents that have been proactively released

Date	Title	Author
April 2026	Establishing a permanent Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship (CORS) visa category	Office of the Associate Minister of Immigration
22 April 2026	Establishing a permanent Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship visa category SOU-26-MIN-0037 Minute	Cabinet Office
June 2026	Establishing a Permanent Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship (CORS) pathway	Office of the Associate Minister of Immigration
June 2026	Appendix One: Key policy settings carried over from the Pilot	Office of the Associate Minister
17 June 2026	Establishing a Permanent Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship (CORS) Pathway ECO-26-MIN-0102 Minute	Cabinet Office
25 November 2025- 9 June 2026	Briefings regarding establishing a permanent Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship (CORS) pathway	MBIE

Information redacted

YES / NO (please select)

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Some information has been redacted for reasons of national security, international relations, privacy of natural persons, confidential advice to Government, free and frank opinions, and confidentiality and negotiations.

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Office of the Associate Minister of Immigration

Cabinet Economic Policy Committee

Establishing a permanent Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship (CORS) visa category

Proposal

- 1 This paper seeks agreement to establish a permanent Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship (CORS) visa category.

Relation to government priorities

- 2 This proposal relates to the government priority of delivering effective and fiscally sustainable public services.

Executive Summary

- 3 CORS was established as New Zealand's pilot complementary protection category for refugees. It operated alongside the Refugee Quota Programme (Quota) which is New Zealand's primary refugee resettlement mechanism for the most vulnerable refugees who are deemed to have the highest protection needs. First piloted in 2018, the extended CORS pilot concluded on 30 June 2025. Over the life of the pilot, 225 refugees, supported by 28 community sponsor groups, were approved to come to New Zealand. The pilot was successful, delivering strong settlement outcomes, high levels of sponsor engagement, and good value for money.
- 4 Complementary pathways are becoming increasingly important within the global protection system, as traditional refugee resettlement systems face constraints due to increasing levels of global displacement, reductions in funding, and significantly reduced quotas. Maintaining safe and regulated refugee pathways also helps reduce irregular migration, including trafficking and smuggling. New Zealand now has an opportunity to diversify its refugee protection response, further strengthen its standing on the world stage as a leader in refugee protection and establish a permanent programme before momentum from the CORS pilot is lost. In addition, a recent outcomes evaluation of the pilot and stakeholder consultation on the future of CORS showed strong community and civil society interest in making CORS permanent, with demand to sponsor outstripping the availability of places.
- 5 I am seeking agreement to establish CORS as a permanent visa category largely retaining the existing settings from the extended pilot. Key features of the permanent programme would continue to include:
 - 5.1 Sponsored refugees (principal applicants) will be required to have a basic understanding of English, a minimum of three years' work experience (or a qualification requiring at least two years' tertiary study) and be aged between 18 and 45 years old. The English language and work experience requirements of principal applicants mean that CORS can be effective at moving refugees quickly into paid employment and settling effectively. All applicants must also pass character, health and Security and defence

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- 5.2 Sponsoring organisations will need to be approved by Immigration New Zealand (INZ) and demonstrate sufficient financial resources to provide settlement services to sponsored refugees for up to two years, experience working with refugees or other vulnerable people, and have the capability and capacity to secure suitable accommodation and support transitions into employment.
- 6 It is possible for employers who meet the other eligibility criteria,¹ including experience working with refugees or other vulnerable people, to be sponsors and nominate refugees with certain skillsets or career aspirations. There is potential under a permanent programme for targeted outreach to employers when recruiting new sponsorship organisations. This would also support the diversification of the sponsorship pool. This is not possible under the Quota.
- 7 I propose CORS be established with an annual cap which would include refugees and their partners and dependent children. The annual cap will be determined by the level of funding provided in Budget 2026. My preference is for a cap of up to 200 individuals per annum.
- 8 I do not consider it a viable option to reduce the Quota to establish CORS as a permanent pathway, as CORS is intended to be complementary to the Quota and should not reduce New Zealand's existing resettlement commitments. At a time of unprecedented global refugee need, the Quota remains New Zealand's principal mechanism for supporting refugees with the highest protection needs. CORS targets a different cohort - generally more employable refugees and those less likely to have critical protection needs - and does not replace protection-based resettlement. Any reduction in the Quota, or departure from resettlement grounded in protection need, [REDACTED] International relations [REDACTED] and is likely to be viewed unfavourably [REDACTED] International relations [REDACTED], [REDACTED] Free and frank [REDACTED] and domestic stakeholders.
- 9 The proposals in this paper are subject to Budget 2026 funding.

Background

Complementary pathways complement traditional resettlement programmes

- 10 New Zealand's Quota programme resettles 1,500 refugees per year and is New Zealand's primary refugee resettlement mechanism for the most vulnerable refugees who are deemed to have the highest protection needs, including children and women at risk. It contributes to New Zealand's fulfilment of our international and humanitarian commitments and supports the UNHCR and the international community in providing protection for refugees who are not able to return safely to their home country. In 2025, Cabinet reconfirmed the Quota settings for 2025-2028 [CBC-25-MIN-0018].
- 11 Complementary pathways operate alongside traditional resettlement programmes, by providing safe and regulated avenues for persons in need of international protection to move to a safe third country and have their protection needs met.² Complementary pathways:
- provide durable protection solutions for refugees, including those who may not be referred for resettlement through traditional settlement pathways, such as those with higher levels of education and employment;

¹ Via the "nominated" pathway. Under the pilot and proposed settings, refugees could be sponsored through both matched (identified by the UNHCR or other international organisation) and nominated (named by community sponsor) pathways.

² UNHCR strongly advocates for complementary pathways as a component of global refugee protection as they expand durable solutions beyond traditional resettlement referral systems, offering refugees safe and legal migration options through community sponsorship, education, employment and family reunification channels.

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- demonstrate commitment to international responsibility sharing;
- expand global protection capacity by providing additional opportunities; and
- build community engagement and support for refugee settlement.

CORS was New Zealand's pilot complementary protection category

- 12 CORS was established as New Zealand's pilot complementary protection category for refugees, and operated in addition to the Quota. CORS was first piloted in 2018.³ The initial pilot resettled 24 sponsored refugees through four approved community organisations.
- 13 In Budget 2020, the pilot was extended for a further three years to gather more information on the effectiveness of the programme [CAB-20-MIN-0155.21]. It was extended again in 2024 to allow decisions in the pipeline to be processed [ECO-24-MIN-0120] and closed on 30 June 2025, with 201 refugees approved and supported by 25 sponsor groups.
- 14 Under the extended pilot, principal applicants were required to have a basic level of English, at least three years of work experience (or a qualification involving a minimum of two years' tertiary study), and be aged between 18 and 45 years. They and, where applicable, their partners and dependent children, were granted permanent resident visas to live, work, and study in New Zealand, and were supported on arrival by community sponsors who provided two years of settlement support from the date of arrival.
- 15 CORS shares the roles and costs of refugee settlement between Government and society. Under CORS, the Government is not responsible for immediate settlement support costs. Sponsors are responsible for sourcing and furnishing affordable private housing, for covering initial settlement costs, and for connecting refugees with health and education providers and employers.
- 16 The Government was responsible for travel costs to New Zealand, immigration processing, approving sponsors, funding an umbrella organisation to provide oversight and support to ensure the effective operation of the sponsorship model, and funding wider government services (such as healthcare, education, and welfare support where needed).

CORS is a cost-effective and outcomes-focused approach to refugee resettlement that

Free and frank opinions

- 17 I consider there to be strong grounds for establishing a permanent CORS programme. CORS offers a cost-effective approach to refugee protection, delivers measurable and positive outcomes, reflects international best practice, and would continue Free and frank opinions by contributing meaningfully to the global displacement response.

The pilot was a success

- 18 The objectives of CORS were to:
 - 18.1 Provide an alternative form of admission for refugees to complement the Quota and, in doing so, demonstrate New Zealand's response to the scale of refugee movement and commitment to international responsibility sharing;

³ On 13 June 2016 Cabinet approved in principle the piloting of a CORS category [CAB-16-MIN-0271]. This was subject to a report back on the proposed details of the pilot, which was confirmed by the Economic Growth and Infrastructure Committee on 10 August 2017 [EGI-17-MIN-0224] and by Cabinet on 14 August 2017 [CAB-17-MIN-0427].

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- 18.2 Provide an opportunity for community organisations to actively engage in supporting successful refugee settlement and to build local communities that welcome refugees; and
- 18.3 Enable sponsored refugees, with the support of community organisations, to quickly become independent and self-sufficient so that they can enter the labour market, navigate their communities and access mainstream services without requiring additional support.
- 19 A process evaluation was completed in February 2019 and an outcomes evaluation in June 2025.⁴ The evaluation found that the pilot met the policy objectives agreed by Cabinet and met or exceeded expectations across all evaluation criteria, delivering a cost-effective complementary pathway with strong settlement outcomes. It also found system readiness and ongoing sponsor interest to continue supporting refugees. Both the evaluation and targeted stakeholder consultation on the future of CORS showed strong community and civil society support for establishing a permanent programme.

CORS complements the Quota in terms of both settlement outcomes and value for money

- 20 My officials have drawn on Statistics New Zealand's integrated data infrastructure (IDI) to consider employment, welfare and education outcomes for both Quota and CORS refugees.⁵ While the data is not directly comparable due to different arrival times and sample sizes, it does show clear differences in settlement trajectories, with CORS refugees generally transitioning more quickly into work and study. For example:
- **CORS refugees enter employment sooner.** Forty-one per cent of CORS refugees are employed 12 months after arrival, earlier than Quota refugees, whose first-year employment rate is 19 per cent.
 - **CORS refugees rely on welfare support for shorter periods.** At 12 months after arrival, 77 per cent of CORS refugees are not receiving the Jobseeker benefit, compared with 33 per cent of Quota refugees at the one-year mark.
 - **Housing related support is also needed for a shorter duration.** At 12 months, 67 per cent of CORS refugees did not receive the accommodation supplement, compared with 28 per cent of Quota refugees at 12 months.
- 21 This data illustrates that CORS refugees – and in particular principal applicants - are transitioning more quickly into paid employment than Quota refugees, while adjusting well to life in New Zealand. There are also CORS refugees who have decided to retrain once arriving in New Zealand. IDI data shows that, within a year of arrival, 21 principal applicants and nine secondary applicants had enrolled in tertiary education.
- 22 These differences reflect the distinct purposes and selection criteria of each pathway. Quota refugees are prioritised by UNHCR on the basis of high protection needs and therefore often arrive with more significant support requirements. CORS refugees also have a protection need, but because this need is generally lower, they tend to have higher levels of education and better health, which contributes to the comparatively positive settlement outcomes observed. The CORS's pilot reinforced this by requiring applicants to meet specific capability-based criteria.

⁴ Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship Programme, *Outcomes Evaluation Report*, June 2025.

⁵ Data for CORS refugees updated as at March 2026.

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- 23 Complementary pathways are intended to be scalable and sustainable. CORS places are significantly cheaper than Quota refugee places. The estimated cost of a Quota place to MBIE is \$36,400, whereas a CORS place is costed at \$26,000 for a programme of 50 places per year (more than 28 per cent cheaper per place). Further, the cost of delivering CORS places decreases with scale, dropping to \$13,000 per place for a programme of 200 places (more than 64 per cent cheaper than a Quota place) due to economies of scale for umbrella organisation support and processing. In addition, CORS refugees generally arrive with stronger English skills and job readiness, reducing the likelihood of ongoing welfare costs compared to Quota refugees.

Free and frank opinions

- 24 UNHCR data shows that global resettlement referrals have fallen sharply – from approximately 180,000 in 2024 to around 35,000 in 2025, Confidentiality. This decline places increasing pressure on countries of first refuge and heightens the vulnerability and desperation of refugees along transit routes.
- 25 Complementary pathways are playing an increasingly important role in the global protection system, as traditional refugee resettlement systems face constraints due to high global displacement levels, reductions in funding, and reduced quotas. The Global Compact on Refugees⁶ identifies complementary pathways, such as labour mobility, education opportunities, and community sponsorship, as a core part of a comprehensive refugee response. Maintaining safe and regulated refugee pathways also reduces irregular migration, including trafficking and smuggling.
- 26 Like-minded countries including Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have already established effective permanent complementary pathway programmes. The UNHCR continues to encourage states to expand these pathways as part of international solidarity and responsibility-sharing in a time of acute need.
- 27 A permanent CORS programme would continue Free and frank opinions and help sustain a credible global protection system. It would do so cost-effectively, with demonstrated strong settlement outcomes, by leveraging community capacity to deliver a flexible and sustainable complementary pathway.

I propose CORS be made a permanent category with policy settings that largely reflect the extended pilot, with an annual cap of up to 200 places

Annual cap of up to 200 places

- 28 The initial pilot capped the annual caseload at 25 refugees per year [EGI-17-MIN-0224]. Cabinet agreed for this to be increased to 150 over three years in 2020 [CAB-20-MIN-0155.21] and to a further 51 places in 2024 [ECO-24-MIN-0120].
- 29 The annual cap will be determined by the level of funding provided in Budget 2026. Based on the outcomes evaluation and cost estimates, I propose a permanent pathway of up to 200 places per year, as this represents the best value for money.
- 30 Two hundred places would demonstrate a stronger commitment to international responsibility sharing, and would keep us aligned with international partners who have established permanent complementary pathways. It would also enable INZ to recruit new sponsor

⁶ Framework adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018 to strengthen global responses to refugee situations through predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing among countries.

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organisations each year, which is crucial for programme sustainability. I consider that the programme can be scaled without compromising quality, provided there is adequate resourcing.

- 31 The outcomes evaluation noted an overwhelming response from sponsorship organisations interested in participating. It also found no difference in the settlement outcomes experienced by refugees supported by organisations supporting higher numbers of refugees from those with fewer sponsorships.

Scaled options

- 32 Depending on any funding provided through Budget 2026, smaller annual caps could also be considered, for example 50 or 100 places. These would be less costly, but lose some benefits of economies of scale, fall short of community interest and **Security and defence**
Free and frank opinions

Other key policy settings carried over from the pilot

- 33 The key policy settings that would be carried over from the extended pilot (with some minor amendments) include:
- 33.1 Cost and responsibility sharing between Government and community sponsors:
- 33.1.1 INZ funds the immigration process (including international flights and health assessments) and the umbrella organisation⁷. The government also funds health, education and welfare costs⁸.
- 33.1.2 Approved community sponsors fund the majority of settlement costs (including domestic travel, sourcing housing and initial bond and rent, living costs until benefit starts, providing core furniture and household goods, interpretation costs and initial orientation).
- 33.2 Sponsored refugees (principal applicants) would be required to be mandated refugees, have a basic understanding of English, a minimum of three years' work experience (or a qualification requiring at least two years' tertiary study), and be aged between 18 and 45 years old. All applicants must pass character, health and **Security and defence**. They must not be eligible to be sponsored for residence under any other Residence family category.
- 33.3 Sponsoring organisations must be legal entities able to enter into a Deed of Agreement for services, be approved by INZ and be able to demonstrate sufficient financial resources to provide settlement services to sponsored refugees for up to two years. They must also have experience working with refugees or other vulnerable people, and have the capability and capacity to secure suitable accommodation and support transitions into employment.
- 33.4 Sponsored refugees can resettle outside traditional resettlement centres.

⁷ Umbrella organisation for the extended pilot to assist refugees in understanding and applying for the programme and to support sponsor organisations.

⁸ Noting some service costs will be met by the individual as they are for other New Zealanders, such as tertiary fees (including through student loans), or primary care fees.

Referral and verification process

- 34 A key change from the pilot will be the introduction of a new international referral partner to undertake refugee identification and case verification. Confidentiality and international relations
- 35 Accordingly, the settings for a permanent category will differ from the pilot to enable a third-party organisation to conduct refugee status determinations and remove the requirement for UNHCR mandate recognition. Confidentiality and negotiations
- 36 INZ will continue to undertake a robust assessment of all CORS applicants. Interviews will be conducted with all refugees to confirm identity, assess the credibility of their refugee claim, and ensure that they meet New Zealand's character and security requirements. Security and
- 37 All CORS refugees undergo standard immigration health screening and must meet New Zealand's acceptable standard of health before approval, ensuring they are unlikely to generate significant healthcare costs or face barriers to settling independently.

Implementation

- 38 The Minister of Immigration may certify immigration instructions required to implement the new category.
- 39 The Associate Minister of Immigration will approve any further changes to policy and process that are required to operationalise the CORS programme.
- 40 If a programme of 200 places is implemented, this will involve staged implementation from 100 places in the first year to ensure smooth operationalisation.⁹
- 41 Key implementation milestones include:

Milestone	Timeframe
CORS is announced and sponsor organisation agreements are renewed	After Budget decision announced
Instruction changes effective and visa category opens	1 July 2026

Cost-of-living Implications

- 42 There are no cost-of-living implications associated with these proposals.

Financial Implications

- 43 The proposals in this paper, including the number of CORS places in a permanent programme, are subject to Budget 2026 decisions. Funding is sought from Vote Labour Market for the

⁹ Any cap will reflect a tolerance range of plus/minus 10 per cent, reflected in immigration instructions.

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necessary immigration workforce to process visas, the international referral partner to identify refugees, offshore logistics and travels, an umbrella organisation to support sponsors and English language testing for refugees. A CORS place is costed at \$26,000 for a programme of 50 places per year. The cost of delivering CORS places decreases with scale, dropping to \$13,000 per place for a programme of 200 places due to economies of scale for umbrella organisation support and processing.

- 44 As resident visa holders under CORS, sponsored refugees and their families are eligible to access Government-funded welfare and housing support, education and health services. Funding for the CORS pilot in 2018 was spread across Votes Education, Health, Labour Market, Social Development and Tertiary Education. Funding for the extension of 50 places in 2024 was limited to Vote Labour Market.
- 45 Forecast Benefits or Related Expenses for Vote Social Development are not being sought as these costs will be managed outside the operating allowance. The initiative also has a small departmental cost for the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) to respond to increased numbers of benefit recipients, but this can be met within MSD's baselines. While the additional welfare costs and numbers of people receiving the Jobseeker Support benefit resulting from this initiative will be small, this is still counter to the Government's Jobseeker Target (Target) to reduce people receiving support by 50,000 to 140,000 by 2030. However, the estimated welfare uptake for the scaled options is low, by July 2030: 27 people receiving support for a programme of 50 places, 54 people for a programme of 100 places and 103 for a programme of 200 places¹⁰. This initiative is not expected to materially impact the Target.
- 46 The Ministry of Health advises that there will be impacts on the capacity of the health system and funding, but they are minor given the proposed volumes. Budget processes for Vote Health funding consider cost pressures from population changes, including from migration.
- 47 The Ministry of Education and Tertiary Education Commission have confirmed they will not seek additional funding for this initiative as it can be supported through baseline funding.

Legislative Implications

- 48 Legislation is not required to implement the proposals in this paper.

Impact Analysis

Regulatory Impact Statement

- 49 The impact analysis requirements do not apply to this paper.

Climate Implications of Policy Assessment

- 50 A Climate Implications of Policy Assessment (CIPA) is not required.

Population Implications

- 51 The proposal will benefit refugees and their families by enabling them to be eligible for a route to a safe third country. It will also benefit sponsors in New Zealand (including faith-based organisations, ethnic community groups, and former refugee-led organisations) who have invested in supporting successful refugee settlement. Wider communities where refugees are resettled will build their understanding of refugees, promoting social inclusion, social connection and cultural identity.

¹⁰ These numbers reflect the fact that under the extended pilot 40% of CORS refugees were not working age.

Human Rights

- 52 MBIE considers that the proposals support meeting international human rights commitments. The proposals in this paper are consistent with the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 and the Human Rights Act 1993.

Consultation

- 53 This paper was prepared by MBIE. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Ministries of Education, Ethnic Communities, Foreign Affairs and Trade, Health, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Social Development, the Tertiary Education Commission, the New Zealand Police, the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service and the Treasury were consulted on this paper.
- 54 Officials consulted with a targeted group of stakeholders on the proposals in this paper:

Confidentiality

Communications

- 55 Subject to Cabinet agreement, communications material will be developed to ensure those affected are aware and updated immigration instructions will be published.

Proactive Release

- 56 This paper will be proactively released in line with the Cabinet Office circular Proactive Release of Cabinet Material: Updated Requirements [CO (18) 4].

Recommendations

The Associate Minister of Immigration recommends that the Committee:

- 1 **note** that the Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship pilot was a protection pathway that was additional and complementary to the Refugee Quota Programme, and that the pilot finished as planned on 30 June 2025;
- 2 **note** that, in June 2017, Cabinet approved in principle the piloting of a Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship category [CAB-16-MIN-0271], subject to a report back on the proposed details of the pilot which were confirmed by Cabinet in August 2017 [EGI-17-MIN-0224];
- 3 **note** that, in 2020, Cabinet agreed to extend the Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship category for a further three years to gather more information on the effectiveness of the programme [CAB-20-MIN-0155.21] and again in 2024 to allow decisions in the pipeline to be processed [ECO-24-MIN-0120];
- 4 **note** that, under the Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship category, settlement costs and roles are shared between Government and community organisations;
- 5 **agree** to establish the Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship category as a permanent visa category largely retaining the policy settings of the extended pilot (with some minor amendments);

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- 6 **note** that if the budget bid is not successful the proposals in this paper will not progress and Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship will not be established as a permanent pathway (as baseline reprioritisation is not possible);
- 7 **agree** that the key policy settings being carried over from the extended pilot (with some minor amendments) relate to cost and responsibility sharing between the Government and community sponsors, the eligibility requirements of sponsored refugees (including age, English language and work experience) and the eligibility requirements (including financial resources and experience) and responsibilities of community sponsors;
- 8 **agree** that a new international referral partner will be engaged to undertake refugee identification and case verification, and conduct refugee status assessment, replacing the function of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in this process during the extended pilot;
- 9 **note** that final numbers for the permanent Community Organisation Refugee Sponsorship category will be determined by Budget 2026 funding;
- 10 **note** that funding for the proposals in this paper is intended to be sought through Budget 2026;
- 11 **authorise** the Associate Minister of Immigration to make further policy decisions as necessary in line with the intent of these decisions;
- 12 **note** the Minister of Immigration would certify amendments to Immigration Instructions as required to give effect to the decisions taken in this paper, including any policy adjustments made under recommendation 11.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Casey Costello

Associate Minister of Immigration