



## **Serco Australia**

**Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties Inquiry Into:** Nuclear-Powered Submarine Partnership and Collaboration Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

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Serco Australia is pleased to contribute to this inquiry on the Nuclear-Powered Submarine Partnership and Collaboration Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (NPSPCA).

As a long-standing partner delivering Defence capability to governments in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, Serco is committed to supporting Australia's objectives in acquiring and sustaining a sovereign nuclear-powered submarine capability. We also understand the shared responsibility of all three AUKUS partners and strongly support the objectives of this important treaty in advancing shared capability and achieving the goals of AUKUS.

## **Executive Summary**

Australia's participation in the AUKUS Nuclear-Powered Submarine Partnership is a historic national commitment with far-reaching strategic, industrial and workforce implications. The NPSPCA seeks to establish a key bilateral framework for Australia and the United Kingdom to support this generational uplift in Defence capability and enable cooperation in building the necessary skilled workforce.

Serco supports the ratification of the NPSPCA, which will provide an important framework to progress the delivery of AUKUS.

As is well established, all three AUKUS partners face workforce challenges that risk delaying or undermining the AUKUS Pillar 1 and, in this context, the NPSPCA provides a framework to address some of these challenges.

The Government acknowledged the significance of this task in its National Defence Strategy 2024 and its AUKUS Submarine Strategy 2025. Commitments—such as additional commonwealth supported university places and new skills academies—are positive, but further measures are required to bridge the gap between current workforce capacity and the demands of the Optimal Pathway.

To ensure Australia's industrial base can successfully deliver the submarine program, we propose a cooperative and coordinated solution that the Government could consider to support the implementation of this important treaty. This involves two streams of effort.

- Firstly, a Government-led AUKUS workforce-mobility framework (covering visa pathways, security clearance and credential recognition) to create the required regulatory settings for the workforce integration that that NSPACA and AUKUS require.
- Secondly, a public-private workforce exchange program that embeds allied experts in Australia and places Australians into US/UK submarine enterprises to accelerate knowledge transfer.

Adoption of these measures will accelerate sovereign workforce growth, help mitigate schedule and capability risks, and operationalise Australia's contributions to the NPSPCA and AUKUS partnership.

As the *AUKUS Submarine Industry Strategy* acknowledges, Australia is still developing a suitably qualified and experienced workforce to deliver AUKUS. The recommendations in this submission are designed to enable the best and brightest from the UK and US to share their world-class experience, skills and knowledge with our local workforce.



Their legacy will be helping to train a world-leading and local workforce, primed to develop the sovereign capacity to operate, build and sustain conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines in Australia. This will turbocharge the creation of new, well-paid, highly skilled local jobs.

## **Introduction and Context**

The NPSPCA establishes the bilateral legal framework for Australia and the United Kingdom to cooperate on design, construction, operation, sustainment and disposal of nuclear-powered submarines, and explicitly recognises the need to develop Australia's personnel, infrastructure, workforce and regulatory systems (Article II, B).

The Australian Government has committed significant resources to workforce development:

- 4,000 additional university STEM places targeted at AUKUS workforce needs.
- Establishment of a dedicated Skills Taskforce to coordinate training and education pathways.
- Investment of \$480 million in the Osborne Training Academy to train shipbuilders and trades.

These initiatives will support the future workforce. However, the lead times for such measures are long, and they do not address shortfalls that will emerge in the near to medium term, particularly as allied submarines begin rotational deployments to Western Australia from 2027.

The NPSPCA explicitly considers personnel exchange between the parties (and third persons, such as partner nations) as a key area of cooperation (Article III, H). It also provides for necessary Governance, Management and Assignment frameworks (Articles VII, VIII and XI).

This submission recommends that these provisions should be operationalised to ensure workforce development keeps pace to support the NPSPCA, AUKUS Pillar 1 and ultimately platform delivery.

## **Workforce Gaps**

As outlined in the AUKUS Submarine Industry Strategy, delivering and sustaining a sovereign nuclear-powered submarine capability requires new skills across the entire submarine enterprise. Australia faces gaps in several key areas.

1. Nuclear Stewardship & Safety
  - Extremely limited cadre of naval nuclear engineers, radiological control technicians, or regulators.
  - Early training placements with allies are encouraging but insufficient at scale.
  - Without rapid growth, Australia risks delays in key areas such as reactor certification and overall public confidence in nuclear stewardship.
2. Engineering & Industrial Skills
  - Shortage of submarine-qualified naval architects, systems engineers, and trades such as specialists in welding and electrical fit-out.
  - Australia will need to double or triple its shipbuilding workforce relative to current levels.
  - Without action, construction milestones will slip, as seen in the UK's Astute-class delays when skills were lost.
3. Sustainment & Maintenance
  - Whilst well established, the Collins-class sustainment workforce has no nuclear credentials.
  - Australia must train maintainers in reactor safety, specialist welding, and radiological controls.
  - If gaps were to persist, submarine availability would fall (or never meet targets), mirroring US Navy challenges where workforce shortages have only two-thirds of SSNs mission-ready.



- Australian sustainment support to allied vessels in region presents a key strategic benefit to AUKUS which risks going unrealised.

#### 4. Supply Chain & Logistics

- Workforce gaps exist in procurement, logistics, and export-control compliance for nuclear-grade components.
- Without qualified staff, Australia risks bottlenecks in spare parts, supply chain vulnerabilities, and prolonged reliance on foreign suppliers – exacerbating some of the challenges raised above.

### **Current Barriers**

To realise the full benefits of AUKUS, several challenges across immigration, security, credentialing and coordination processes must be addressed.

Serco acknowledges that the NPSPCA provides an important framework to address some of these issues, which are set out below.

- **Visa and immigration delays:** Current visa pathways are not designed for the rapid placement of highly specialised defence or civilian personnel across borders. Even where willing experts are available, delays in processing work permits or limitations on duration restrict their ability to contribute in a timely way. Visa pathways can also be complicated by restrictions around dual citizenship and sensitive Defence work. Some Analysts have called for a dedicated “AUKUS visa” to address this gap, but progress has been limited.
- **Security clearance recognition gaps:** Each AUKUS partner maintains its own clearance processes, and clearances are not automatically recognised across jurisdictions. This means that a UK or US expert may face lengthy vetting before working on Australian projects, even if already holding an equivalent clearance at home. The result is duplication and significant lag in mobilising cleared talent. This barrier has been highlighted in parliamentary discussions, industry and think tank commentary.
- **Credential recognition limitations:** Professional and trade qualifications, such as engineering registrations or welding certifications, are not consistently recognised across AUKUS nations. This creates duplication of training, administrative hurdles, and uncertainty for employers and workers alike. Even within Australia, differences across state-based credentialing add to the challenge. Streamlined credentialing and rapid recognition will be critical to mobilising the workforce required under the NPSPCA.
- **Fragmented coordination:** Workforce planning and mobilisation efforts are dispersed across multiple agencies and stakeholders, without a centralised mechanism to match skills with needs across the AUKUS enterprise. This fragmentation slows decision-making, risks duplication, and reduces the efficiency of placements. The NPSPCA recognises the need for robust governance and assignment mechanisms (Articles VII–XI), but practical arrangements are still emerging.

### **Proposed Solutions to support the delivery of the NPSPCA**

Addressing Australia’s submarine workforce challenge requires both regulatory reform and practical collaboration. The Government should be commended for including in the NPSPCA important provisions that recognise these challenges and provide a framework for solutions. Government has the critical role of creating the enabling framework, removing barriers to the movement of skilled personnel across borders, aligning security and credentialing systems, and providing central coordination.



Equally important is ensuring that solutions capture the full scope of Australia's sovereign workforce, not only Defence and ADF personnel but also the private sector workforce that will be important to sustaining capability.

Industry and Defence working in partnership can operationalise these settings through structured workforce exchanges that embed allied expertise in Australia and send Australians abroad to acquire hands-on experience.

If undertaken together, these two streams of effort, policy enablement and practical exchange, can provide the pathway needed to accelerate sovereign workforce growth and deliver on the objectives of the NPSPCA. This approach directly reflects the treaty's provisions on personnel exchange (Article III, H) and governance and assignment mechanisms (Articles VII and VIII).

This solution also directly supports the *Integrating into United Kingdom and United States supply chains* line of effort under the *AUKUS Submarine Industry Strategy*.

### **Stream 1: Government-Led Workforce Mobility Framework**

The Government has a critical role in creating the enabling environment for AUKUS workforce integration. While industry can contribute people and programs, only Government can remove the structural barriers that currently slow or block the effective movement of skilled personnel across borders. A dedicated, whole-of-government framework is therefore required to give effect to the NPSPCA's provisions on personnel exchange and assignment. This framework should cover:

- AUKUS Skills Visa – A dedicated visa category with expedited processing for submarine-related roles, enabling rapid placement of cleared personnel across Australia, the UK and US.
- Security Clearance Recognition – A trilateral mechanism to transfer or recognise existing clearances, supported by a digital record of vetting and qualifications to avoid duplication.
- Credential Equivalency – Fast-track recognition of allied engineering and trade certifications, supported by gap-training where needed, to reduce delays in mobilising talent.
- Workforce Mobility Taskforce – A central body stood up within Defence, Home Affairs or the Australian Submarine Agency (ASA) to coordinate visas, credentialing and clearances, and to provide a single point of contact for industry and partner governments.

### **Stream 2: Public-Private Workforce Exchange Program**

Leveraging the Government's enabling settings, industry should be engaged as an active partner in building the submarine workforce. A structured Workforce Exchange Program would create a two-way flow of personnel between Australia and its AUKUS partners, ensuring that critical skills are brought into the country quickly while Australian staff gain first-hand experience in mature submarine enterprises overseas. In addition, these programs would strengthen relationships at the operational level, building important 'connective-tissue' between partners, and instilling confidence in each other's capabilities. This two-way exchange should include:



### **Inbound Embed of Allied Expertise**

- Experienced US and UK experts would be embedded in ASA, the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), and key industry programs.
- These experts would provide immediate capability uplift in specialist areas such as nuclear engineering, reactor safety, logistics, and design authority.
- Just as importantly, they would act as mentors—working alongside Australian staff to transfer knowledge, train trainers, and embed best practice in safety and sustainment.

### **Outbound Training Placements**

- Australian engineers, technicians, and trades personnel would be placed in US and UK shipyards, training schools, and program offices.
- By working directly on Virginia-class or Astute-class programs, Australians would gain hands-on experience in design, construction, and sustainment processes not yet available domestically.
- On return, these personnel would seed expertise across ASA, RAN, and industry, multiplying the impact of each placement.

Any exchange program should take a Phased Approach – aligned to the Optimal Pathway:

- Phase 1 (2025-2026): Establish small “anchor” teams of allied experts within ASA and RAN. Initial Australian cohorts would undertake placements in allied facilities, focusing on nuclear safety and regulatory readiness ahead of Submarine Rotational Force – West (SRF-W).
- Phase 2 (2027-2033): Scale up inbound and outbound exchanges to support SRF-W operations and prepare for the acquisition of Virginia-class submarines. Priority roles include sustainment planners, logistics supervisors, and nuclear trades.
- Phase 3 (2034-2040): Expand reciprocal postings during SSN-AUKUS construction, embedding Australian staff in UK yards and bringing UK/US experts to Adelaide. Exchanges during this phase build sovereign capacity in design authority, systems integration, and project management.
- Phase 4 (2040+): Transition to a steady-state program focused on long-term sustainment, regulatory oversight, and periodic renewal of specialised skills to maintain sovereign capability.

Targeted Roles should be prioritised:

- Nuclear engineers, reactor safety specialists, and radiological control technicians.
- Submarine design specialists, including naval architects and systems engineers.
- Certified trades such as welders, electricians, and pipefitters at nuclear standards.
- Sustainment supervisors and reliability engineers for reactor plants and complex refits.
- Supply chain and logistics specialists experienced in nuclear-grade procurement and allied export controls.



## Conclusions and recommendations

Serco strongly supports the ratification of the NPSPCA and congratulates the Government on achieving this agreement.

To support the implementation of the NPSPCA, Serco also makes the following recommendations for the Government to consider:

1. Establishing a trilateral 'AUKUS Skills Visa' and clearance-recognition mechanism: Article III (H) of the NPSPCA highlights the exchange of personnel as a key area of cooperation. At present, movement of experts is slowed by visa processing and clearance duplication. A dedicated "AUKUS Skills Visa," coupled with mutual recognition or transfer of clearances, would give practical effect to the treaty's intent by enabling experts to be placed rapidly where they are most needed.
2. Launching a national Workforce Exchange Program, coordinated by ASA and industry partners: The NPSPCA's governance provisions (Articles VII-XI) contemplate frameworks for assignment and management of personnel. A formal Workforce Exchange Program would operationalise this by embedding allied experts into ASA, the RAN and industry projects, while sending Australians into US/UK submarine enterprises for immersive training. Coordinated by ASA in partnership with industry, this program would ensure exchanges are structured, sequenced with the Optimal Pathway, and focused on the most critical roles.
3. Forming an AUKUS Workforce Steering Committee to monitor progress and report to Parliament: Article VIII of the NPSPCA provides for management arrangements to oversee cooperative activities. Establishing a Steering Committee at the national level, drawing on Defence, ASA, Home Affairs and partner government input, would centralise coordination, reduce duplication, and provide transparent reporting to Parliament on progress against workforce targets.
4. Coordinating workforce planning across all three AUKUS partners to avoid bottlenecks and maximise impact: Article XI of the NPSPCA envisages assignment frameworks that can extend beyond bilateral cooperation to include partner nations. Coordinated planning across Australia, the UK and US is essential to prevent competition for scarce skills (such as nuclear welders and systems engineers) and to ensure that workforce exchanges are sequenced efficiently. Trilateral planning would also demonstrate Australia's seriousness about burden-sharing under AUKUS.

By taking these steps, the Government can give effect to the workforce provisions of the NPSPCA, support the delivery of AUKUS Pillar 1, and demonstrate that Australia is not only acquiring platforms, but building the sovereign human capital to operate and sustain them for generations.