MINISTRY OF BUSINESS, INNOVATION & EMPLOYMENT
HĪKINA WHAKATUTUKI

AIDE MEMOIRE

Update on the MIAS virtual lobby

Date:	7 October 2021	Priority:	Medium
Security classification:		Tracking number:	2122-1249

Information for Minister(s)
Hon Chris Hipkins **Minister for COVID-19 Response**

Contact for telephone discussion (if required)			
Name	**Position**	**Telephone**	**1st contact**
Privacy of natural persons	Manager, Allocation and Supply, MIQ Policy Unit	Privacy of natural persons	✓
	Senior Policy Advisor		

The following departments/agencies have been consulted

Minister's office to complete:
- ☐ Approved
- ☐ Noted
- ☐ Seen
- ☐ See Minister's Notes

- ☐ Declined
- ☐ Needs change
- ☐ Overtaken by Events
- ☐ Withdrawn

Comments

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Purpose

To provide you with updates on the first three releases of MIQ rooms to MIAS using the virtual lobby, as you have requested. This includes voucher release metrics, user behaviour insights, particularly the return of rooms after booking, and ongoing reporting on upcoming room releases.

Privacy of natural persons

Manager, Allocation and Supply, MIQ Policy
Managed Isolation & Quarantine, MBIE

7 / 10 / 2021

Context

1. From 20 September 2021, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) adopted a new virtual lobby system as part of the MIAS room booking website. This was designed to improve system stability, improve the experience for users, and better manage website traffic at times of peak demand [briefing 2122-0921 refers].

2. The pilot of this virtual lobby approach was carried out on Monday 20 September, with two more lobby room releases on Tuesday 28 September and Tuesday 5 October. All future releases of MIQ rooms onto MIAS will continue to be carried out in this way, with releases occurring every Tuesday (New Zealand time).

Lobby results

3. The lobby system has performed extremely well, delivering on its objectives and ensuring that a high number of users are able to engage with room releases without the website suffering from performance issues. No technical issues have been identified with the lobby system. Over the three releases, approximately 60,000 users have engaged with the system.

4. We have received feedback from users about issues they have experienced during releases (user issues such as their computers crashing). As a result, we have been able to consistently improve our communications and make other minor changes over the three releases to help people navigate such problems.

5. The lobby concept was introduced to improve the way that MIAS operates, increase system stability and remove opportunities perceived to advantage some travellers over others. The past three lobby releases have demonstrated that the lobby has achieved these goals and has overall improved the user experience. For this reason, MBIE has decided to continue to use the lobby for all future room releases as previously agreed [briefing 2122-0921 refers].

6. The table below summaries key results and metrics from the voucher releases.

Table one: metrics from last three voucher releases

Metric	Release 1 (20 Sept)	Release 2 (28 Sept)	Release 3 (5 Oct)
Rooms released	3,205	3,718	3,739
Passengers booked	5,364	6,231	6,452
Time taken	2.5 hours	2.25 hours	2 hours
Unique users in queue	31,817	31,319	28,406
Percentage of rooms handed back	22%	19%	Data not yet available

Users misusing the lobby system

7. One of the strands of public concern with MIAS which drove the introduction of the virtual lobby system was the perception that some users could gain an unfair advantage over other users, such as via the use of automated scripts ("bots").

8. Officials are closely monitoring user behaviour and comments for indications of similar behaviour in the virtual lobby, but at this time, no systematic exploitation or inappropriate usage of the system has been observed.

9. One particular area that MBIE is looking into further is the ability of groups of travellers (including families) using multiple passports (which enables multiple 'lobby users') to increase the chance of securing a favourable queue position. An aspect of concern in this is also anecdotal reports from the MIQ contact centre of an increase in people enquiring about removing travellers from vouchers. This is of concern if it as it may indicate that some travellers are adding additional party members, who have no intention of travelling, to their group to enable multiple entries in the lobby. This trend has also been reported in the media.

10. MBIE will continue to monitor this trend to determine whether it provides users with any enhanced ability to exploit the booking system.

11. This concern is only anecdotal at this time. It is mitigated by the fact that if a user artificially expands their party to increase the chances in the lobby, **they then place themselves at a disadvantage in booking**. This is because a larger party requires a greater number of rooms to be available, potentially leaving these people unable to book their preferred dates that may have otherwise been available to a smaller party.

"Handbacks" and rooms unable to be reused

12. One feature that the virtual lobby has highlighted is a user trend to "handback" rooms and the inability to reallocate rooms for travel dates immediately after a release. Both of these situations occurred prior to the lobby; however, the weekly cycle of the lobby has increased focus on both.

13. When a user books a room via MIAS the room is initially reserved for them. Users then have 48 hours to enter confirmed flight details and finalise this booking.

14. When a user is unable to secure a corresponding flight and enter flight details in time, or chooses to proactively cancel their booking, the rooms are "handed back" to MIAS.

15. The number of "handbacks" in the first and second lobby are provided in Table 1. Compared to data from pre-lobby releases, the pattern and number of rooms handed back is very similar, with spikes of rooms being handed back 24 and 48 hours after the release.

16. However, under the virtual lobby system, these rooms are made available for re-release at the next lobby date rather than immediately released back into the system for people to find, which 'delays' the re-release, relative to the previous system.

Rooms unable to be reallocated

17. The vast majority of rooms handed back by users will be able to be re-released at a subsequent event and then booked for travel by another user. However, a small minority may be unable to be reused, when that room is for travel occurring in the days immediately following.

18. While this problem existed prior to the introduction of the virtual lobby, the weekly cycle of virtual lobby releases means that rooms that are handed back cannot be re-released until the following week.

19. This increases the window of days for which returned rooms cannot be reused. This applies to any rooms that are booked in a lobby for travel in the seven days between that release and the following virtual lobby event, as well as rooms for travel in the 72 hours following the next release.

20. This has also been driven by the backlog of voucher releases, and releasing rooms that need to be used for immediate travel. Following the first virtual lobby, around 38% of rooms for travel in the subsequent 14 days were handed back.

21. While the time-taken to re-release rooms is larger than before, it is not proving to be a significant problem. For example, of the 3,718 rooms released on 28 September, 697 rooms were handed back, with only approximately 76 rooms that were unable to be re-released at the following lobby.

22. Furthermore, while in theory a traveller could book a room and travel immediately, operational experience shows that it is currently almost impossible for travellers to meet all requirements (including flight booking, immigration, and pre-departure testing) to travel at such short notice.

Officials expect these trends to improve as the virtual lobby settles in and MBIE 'catches up' to normal voucher release schedules

23. The current period of room releases is atypical as voucher releases were temporarily paused for several weeks to enable MIQ to support the community response to COVID-19. This meant MBIE was not releasing vouchers as far out as usual, and needed to 'catch-up' to the normal voucher release framework. As MIQ returns to a normal release cycle, rooms will have a higher chance of being 'picked up' as vouchers will be released further in advance.

24. Three trends are currently influencing booking behaviours:

    • Users are still getting used to the lobby system – over this time we expect to see user errors, including booking rooms that do not align with travel options, reduce;

- Rooms are being released for travel soon after the lobby – as MIQ returns to a normal room release schedule - with all rooms typically released for booking at least two weeks before the travel date, travellers will be booking rooms with greater lead time and certainty; and
- There are few Trans-Tasman flights - owing to ongoing uncertainty over the duration of the suspension of Trans-Tasman Quarantine-Free Travel. Australian travellers are booking MIQ rooms and are then unable to find a corresponding flight for travel on that date.

25. Information on the 'handback' rates for the first two lobbies shows improvement – while the first (20 September) release saw approximately 22% of rooms handed back, this rate dropped to approximately 19% for the second (28 September) release.

26. Officials will continue to monitor rates of rooms being handed back, including those which are unable to be re-released, as release timeframes and user behaviour settles over the coming weeks. Data on the third lobby is still being finalised, and will be provided to your office.

Future updates

27. When agreeing to the resumption of room releases onto MIAS, you requested to be kept informed of upcoming room releases in advance of the lobby occurring [briefing 2122-0921 refers].

28. Officials propose to routinely provide these updates via the weekly report, which will include:

- The actual number of rooms (broken down by month of travel) released in the virtual lobby which occurred during that week;
- The indicative number of rooms (broken down by month of travel) planned for release in the lobbies occurring over the two following weeks.

29. Owing to the need to confirm room releases based on latest operational information, these figures will be indicative only. They will also not include any addition rooms included that have been handed back from previous releases. Officials will inform your office directly if there is any significant change to the mix of rooms proposed for release when final release numbers are confirmed.