



BRIEFING

Resumption of MIAS room releases

Date:	10 September 2021	Priority:	Urgent
Security classification:		Tracking number:	2122-0921

Action sought		
	Action sought	Deadline
Hon Chris Hipkins Minister for COVID-19 Response	Agree to the resumption of MIAS room releases Agree to the next release and “virtual lobby” pilot taking place on Monday, 20 September 2021	13 September 2021

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

The following departments/agencies have been consulted

Minister’s office to complete:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Approved | <input type="checkbox"/> Declined |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Noted | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs change |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seen | <input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by Events |
| <input type="checkbox"/> See Minister’s Notes | <input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn |

Comments



BRIEFING

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Date:	10 September 2021	Priority:	Urgent
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Purpose

This briefing seeks your agreement to resume the release of MIQ rooms onto the Managed Isolation Allocation System (MIAS) website, with the first release proposed to take place on Monday, 20 September. This release will also be the pilot of the “virtual lobby” approach to MIAS bookings [briefing 2122-0361 refers].

Recommended action

The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment recommends that you:

- a **Note** that the release of MIQ rooms onto the MIAS booking website has been paused since 23 August 2021, in order to preserve MIQ capacity to help manage the ongoing COVID-19 community outbreak and respond to arrivals from Afghanistan
Noted
- b **Note** that the last significant release of MIQ rooms onto MIAS was on 7 July 2021
Noted
- c **Note** you previously agreed for MBIE to trial a virtual lobby to release MIAS rooms for the next large voucher release [briefing 2122-0361 refers]
Noted
- d **Note** that, based on current projected demand for quarantine rooms, around 7,000 rooms could be made available for release by the end of September, comprising of approximately:
 - a. 750 rooms for travel in late September;
 - b. 1,800 rooms for travel in October;
 - c. 3,800 rooms for travel in November; and
 - d. 1,000 rooms for travel in December*Noted*
- e **Note** that we recommend staggering the release of vouchers across at least two large lobby releases in September so that:
 - a. people have more than one opportunity to access vouchers; and
 - b. The ability of MIQ to respond to any unexpected increases in community cases in September is preserved*Noted*
- f **Agree** to MBIE resuming the release of MIQ rooms onto MIAS, with the first release (using the new virtual lobby) to occur on Monday 20 September 2021 and the second to occur in late September at a date to be determined

Agree / Disagree / Discuss

g **Agree** to the first lobby release on 20 September being approximately 3,000-3,500 vouchers from late September to December

Agree / Disagree / Discuss

h **Agree** that these releases include up to 600 rooms from the QFT 500 reserve in order to support red flights from Australia in October (leaving 400 rooms remaining for response purposes).

Agree / Disagree / Discuss

i **Note** that MIQ will work to maximise the number of vouchers released through the two large lobby releases but there may be need to re-release a small number of vouchers directly onto the website in between where they are for near term travel and would not be utilised if they were held until the second lobby release

Noted

j **Note** that the timing of the announcement of the pending release of rooms will be finalised in consultation with your office

Noted

k **Note** that if you agree to the resumption of room releases on to MIAS, after the initial releases MBIE will resume regular releases of vouchers in accordance with the voucher release framework

I'd like to be kept in the loop ahead of all future voucher releases.

Noted

l **Note** that if the use of the virtual lobby is a success, MBIE intends to continue to use this system for all subsequent room releases

Noted

m **Note** that further advice on the evaluation of the virtual lobby pilot, any lessons learnt from that pilot, as well as longer-term options for improvements to MIAS, will be provided following the completion of the pilot

Noted

n **Agree** that this briefing be proactively released with appropriate withholdings under the Official Information Act 1982.

Agree / Disagree

Kara Isaac
General Manager, MIQ Policy
MIQ, MBIE

10/ 09 / 2021

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

... / 09 / 2021

I'd like more advice on the pressure re emergency allocations. Does the number of rooms allocated for this purpose need to be increased? Off.

Context

General MIQ bookings are currently suspended

1. To preserve capacity in the MIQ system to support the response to the current New Zealand community outbreak and the arrival of travellers from Afghanistan, new bookings for MIQ rooms have been suspended since 23 August 2021.
2. This has prevented the public from booking rooms via the Managed Isolation Allocation System (MIAS), although emergency allocations for urgent travel have remained open. The last major release of MIQ rooms onto MIAS was on Wednesday, 7 July 2021.
3. While necessary to enable the operational response to a series of crisis situations, the ongoing pause in releasing MIQ rooms has impeded the ability of New Zealanders (and critical workers) to enter New Zealand, Legal professional privilege.

The next MIAS release will pilot the new “virtual lobby”

4. You have previously agreed that the next significant release of rooms onto MIAS will be used to pilot the new “virtual lobby” approach to MIAS, which includes the ability to announce in advance the release of rooms onto MIAS [briefing 2122-0631 refers]. After the pilot has been completed, MBIE will report back to you on any identified improvements and lessons learnt by the end of September.
5. This approach is designed to improve the way that MIAS operates, increase system stability and remove opportunities for automated scripts (“bots”) or other techniques perceived to advantage some travellers over others. While it will not address the fundamental problem, which is that demand far exceeds supply, it is expected to improve the experience for MIAS users.

Proposed resumption of MIQ room releases

Modelling and recent daily case numbers indicate that we have passed the peak in demand for quarantine rooms

6. MIQ officials have worked closely with Ministry of Health to model the anticipated number and timing of cases from the ongoing New Zealand community outbreak, including the number of quarantine rooms likely required in the coming weeks as part of the community response.
7. While this information continues to evolve, as of Thursday, 9 September 2021 it appears that we have passed the peak in requirements for quarantine rooms. This is reflected in both the number of new community cases (with 15 identified on 8 September compared to 75 on the same day the previous week), and in the number of rooms in Managed Quarantine Facilities occupied by community cases, which has fallen from a peak of 387 rooms on 6 September to 351 as of 9 September.
8. Given the easing demand on MIQ rooms, we consider it important to re-commence the release of vouchers on MIAS to ensure the utilisation of available rooms in MIQ in late September and October while also retaining the ability to respond to any unexpected significant increase in community cases.
9. Officials have begun planning for the return of the three Managed Isolation Facilities (MIFs) that were repurposed to provide additional quarantine capacity and to support the arrival of people from Afghanistan, with these facilities expected to progressively re-enter use as general MIFs in October. We will be providing you with further advice on this next week.

Proposed release of rooms to MIAS

10. On current forecasts, there are approximately 750 rooms for travel between 23 and 30 September which could be released to the public via MIAS.
11. If these rooms are to be offered to the general public, they must be released by 20 September at the latest to allow travellers sufficient time to secure flights and make any other necessary arrangements.
12. At this time officials also recommend that rooms can also be released for the following months:
 - a. 1800 rooms for travel in October;
 - b. 3800 rooms for travel in November; and
 - c. An initial release of 1000 rooms for travel in December.
13. This gives a total of around 7,000 rooms available for release. These are dependent on the return of the three facilities used for quarantine and Afghanistan arrivals to managed isolation in Auckland during October. As such, community cases and capacity will be monitored closely over the next week with the final number and distribution of vouchers for the 20 September release to be approved by the Joint Head of MIQ.
14. Due to the large number of vouchers available to be released we also recommend that they be spread across two large lobby releases, the first on 20 September and the second in late September on a date to be confirmed.
15. This will ensure that two distinct opportunities are provided to people to access vouchers and also preserve the ability of MIQ to respond to any unexpected increase in community cases in September. Days of the week and time of the release will also differ to maximise accessibility of the release window to the largest possible number of people.
16. We anticipate a small number of vouchers will need to be re-released back onto the website between the two lobby releases. These will only be vouchers that are for travel in late September/early October which, if held until the second lobby release, would result in those rooms going to waste.
17. Vouchers will still be released according to voucher release framework, meaning 10% of rooms will not be released until two weeks prior to enable MIQ to respond to unexpected events along with the MIQ operational contingency.
18. Following the proposed releases, the number of rooms 'left' to release will be:
 - a. No further rooms for travel in September;
 - b. Around 2,000 further rooms for travel in October and November;
 - c. Over 4,000 rooms for travel in December
19. These will be the first vouchers for December to be released and we note that you are still waiting on further advice on options to prioritise summer demand. However, the first December vouchers were due to be released in July and there is now increasing "noise" from New Zealanders overseas about why no vouchers have been released when December is now less than three months away. As such, we recommend releasing the first 1,000 vouchers for December across the two large lobby releases.

Supporting red flights from Australia in October

20. Two voucher releases in late September will also allow time for officials to complete work with Air New Zealand to confirm a number of “red” flights from Australia in October and loaded on to MIAS, to enable travellers from Australia to participate. However, Air New Zealand has advised officials that this is contingent on a public announcement being made by the Government prior to 20 September that QFT with Australia will remain suspended beyond late September.
21. During August and early September the QFT 500 reserve was used predominantly to support the third tranche of the NSW managed return flights. Some of the reserve was also utilised to accommodate people arriving from Afghanistan and to support the current community response. We recommend that up to 600 rooms (300 per fortnight) from the QFT reserve be made available in these two releases to support red flights from Australia in October. This will leave 400 QFT reserve rooms (200 per fortnight) remaining for response purposes.

Implementation of the virtual lobby

22. 20 September is the earliest time that a release via the virtual lobby can be made, as officials and technical providers are currently implementing further improvements to the system, with a focus on closing off potential opportunities for users to seek to gain an unfair advantage.
23. This includes extensive user testing of the virtual lobby, as well as a detailed review of IT security measures in place and specific protections against the types of cyber-attacks seen recently against large New Zealand organisations (DDOS attacks), provided by Amazon Web Services.
24. Officials have previously advised that at least 48 hours – and preferably 72 hours – are required prior to the virtual lobby release for final technical implementation and to complete outstanding bookings [briefing 2122-0631 refers].
25. Given the current suspension of bookings on MIAS, the timing of any public announcement of the pending voucher release is not constrained by these implementation timelines, and can be made any time from 15 September.

Ongoing room releases

26. If you agree to the resumption of the release of MIQ rooms onto MIAS, MBIE will resume a regular release cycle following the initial releases.
27. While operational details are still being finalised, including taking into account lessons learnt from the virtual lobby pilot, this is expected to entail frequent voucher releases of varying scale, with all future releases from October made using the virtual lobby system, with at least 24-48 advance hours’ notice provided prior to every release.
28. This approach will offer a number of advantages to the user experience for travellers. In particular, by making releases frequent and notified in advance, travellers should no longer feel the need to regularly refresh the MIAS website in the hope of securing a voucher; instead having confidence that they know when vouchers will be released, and that they will have an equal chance to secure one. This will address some of the major concerns frequently identified by MIAS users around stress and “unfairness” in how MIAS operates.
29. This cycle will seek to release rooms broadly in accordance with the previously agreed voucher release framework (see Annex One) [aide memoire 2021-2954 refers].

Next steps

30. If you agree to the recommended MIQ room release on 20 September, officials will work with your office to confirm the exact timing of the announcement around other Government communication priorities.
31. Following this release MBIE intends to continue to operate the virtual lobby for future releases, with a second significant release expected in late September. This will be subject to insights gained from the pilot, including time required to implement any improvements that are identified.
32. Further advice on MIAS will be provided following the completion of the lobby pilot. This will cover the results of the pilot and any improvements to the system which were identified. It will also provide further information on wider options considered for improving the operation and user experience of MIAS, and how the virtual lobby (and lessons from the pilot) influence those considerations. This advice will be provided by the end of September.
33. In light of pressures on the MIQ system in responding to the recent series of unanticipated demands (New South Wales, Australian and New Zealand community outbreak, and concurrent arrivals from Afghanistan), officials consider it timely to review the way MIQ capacity is made available over time. Further advice will be provided on whether the current voucher release framework remains fit-for-purpose in light of lessons learnt from the community response, and the extent to which the Quarantine-Free Travel reserve of 500 rooms is still required. This advice will be provided in October.

Annexes

Annex One: MIQ Voucher Release Framework

Annex One: MIQ Voucher Release Framework

The below diagram sets out the MIQ voucher release framework. The proposed release levels are operational targets, which are adjusted depending on a range of factors including confirmation of airline flight schedules and other MIQ planning considerations.

