



BRIEFING

Process for managing the impact of deferred implementation of Step One of Reconnecting New Zealanders

Date:	30 December 2021	Priority:	Urgent
Security classification:		Tracking number:	2122-2262

Action sought		
	Action sought	Deadline
Hon Chris Hipkins Minister for COVID-19 Response	<p>Note the three cohorts that have been significantly impacted by the deferral of Step One of Reconnecting New Zealanders (the introduction of self-isolation for eligible travellers from Australia)</p> <p>Note that MIQ is working with airlines to reschedule existing MIQ vouchers of people who have been impacted by flight cancellations (estimated at 1400 people)</p> <p>Note that MIQ is working to identify people who had previously held an MIQ voucher from 17 January – 28 February but proactively cancelled it after 24 November to determine if they require that voucher to be reinstated.</p> <p>Agree that MIQ work with airlines to identify people who travelled from New Zealand to Australia between 24 November and 22 December who had return tickets for between 17 January and 28 February and facilitate them receiving a voucher, if they require one (estimated at up to 370 people)</p> <p>Indicate whether you would like to establish a temporary emergency allocation category for people who can provide evidence that the delay in Step One of Reconnecting New Zealand will place them in significant and severe hardship if they are not able to travel to New Zealand before the end of February 2022</p>	31 December 2021

	<p>Note that due to the implementation of the 10 day stay MIQ will experience a 27% decrease in capacity in January and February and that steps taken to support those significantly impacted in Australia may require taking steps to actively manage the number of Afghanistan and refugee arrivals in January and February.</p>	
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Contact for telephone discussion (if required)			
Name	Position	Telephone	1st contact
Andrew Milne	Acting Deputy Secretary MIQ	Privacy of natural persons	
Kara Isaac	General Manager, MIQ Policy		✓
Privacy of natural persons	Policy Director		

The following departments/agencies have been consulted
<p>The Ministry of Transport, MBIE Immigration, the NZ Customs Service, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Ministry of Health, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Crown Law.</p> <p>Air New Zealand and Qantas have been consulted in the development of this advice, as the airlines impacted.</p>

Minister's office to complete:

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

Comments



BRIEFING

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Purpose

To advise you of the impact of the recent decisions to lengthen the MIQ stay for border arrivals to ten days and the deferral of the implementation of Step One of Reconnecting New Zealand, including seeking in-principle decisions on options to manage the impact on people who had planned travel to New Zealand after 11:59pm on 16 January.

Recommended action

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

- a **Note** that between the Government's announcement of the planned implementation of Step One of Reconnecting New Zealand on 24 November, and the decision to delay implementation due to the threat of Omicron on 21 December, an estimated 500 people left New Zealand with air tickets to return on or after 17 January.

Noted
- b **Note** that MIQ is working with airlines to ensure that travellers (estimated to be in the region of 1400 travellers) from Australia who currently hold MIQ vouchers for the period on or after 17 January will be able to fly to New Zealand, following the cancellation of planned flights by airlines after Government announcements on 21 December.

Noted
- c **Note** that all current requirements for travellers to meet immigration and border exception requirements remain, regardless of MIQ voucher allocations.

Noted
- d **Note** that MIQ has constrained capacity to respond to significant other issues as a result of the shift to a 10-day stay model, and the level of support that can be offered to those looking to return from Australia will need to be staged over a number of weeks.

Noted
- e **Agree** that the scope of people to be supported for return from Australia to New Zealand at this point is:
 - a. Those who travelled to Australia following the Government's announcement on 24 November, and before 22 December, who did not have a MIAS voucher. Estimated at up to 370 people.
 - b. Those who held a MIAS voucher with the point of origin listed as Australia for between 25 November – 28 February, who proactively cancelled that voucher. Estimated at up to 200 people, with some expected to further delay travel to align with self-isolation eligibility

Agree / Disagree

f **Indicate a preference** for the scope of people to be supported (in addition to those in recommendation (e) above) to also include those who have an urgent need to travel from Australia to New Zealand, either through:

a. Existing emergency allocation criteria and processes

Preferred

Or

b. A bespoke temporary emergency allocation category

Preferred

If you choose b (a bespoke temporary emergency allocation category)

g **Agree** that it will be time-limited, narrow in scope, requiring evidence of decisions made between 24 November and 22 December to travel to New Zealand, and only available to New Zealand citizens, partners and dependent children who can demonstrate that not being able to travel before the end of February 2022 will cause significant and severe hardship (for example, homelessness).

Agree / Disagree

If you agree to g

h **Agree** to delegate to MIQ decisions around the final scope and implementation of this bespoke temporary emergency allocation category.

Agree / Disagree

i **Note** that, due to the implementation of the 10 day stay, MIQ will experience a 27% decrease in capacity in January and February and that steps taken to support those significantly impacted in Australia may result in needing to actively manage the number of refugee and Afghanistan arrivals in January and February to approximately 40 rooms (70-80 people) a fortnight. Further advice on this will be provided in January once further capacity forecasting work is completed.

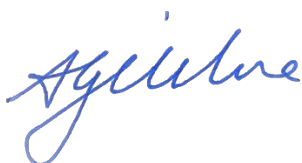
Noted

j **Agree** to provide a copy of this paper to the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Ministers of Transport, Immigration, Foreign Affairs, Associate Minister of Health (Hon Ayesha Verrall) and the Associate Minister of Immigration.

Agree / Disagree

k **Agree** to proactively release this briefing with appropriate withholdings consistent with the Official Information Act 1982.

Agree / Disagree



Andrew Milne
Acting Deputy Secretary MIQ

30 / 12 / 2021, 3.25pm



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

30 / 12 / 21
..... / /

Background

1. On Friday 24 November 2021, the Government announced that Step One of Reconnecting New Zealanders (RNZ) would commence at 11:59pm on 16 January 2022. This would enable New Zealanders, and other eligible people, to travel from Australia to New Zealand on the medium risk pathway and self-isolate on arrival, removing the need for a MIAS voucher. Step Two (New Zealanders and other eligible people from the rest of the world) was announced for 14 February 2022.
2. Owing to the potential public health threat of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, the Government announced on 21 December that Step One would be delayed until the end of February, with exact timing to be confirmed. A new date for Step Two is also yet to be confirmed.
3. The delay to Step One has particularly affected people who travelled in the period between the announcement of Step One and the decision to defer the planned implementation of Step One. In the period between 24 November and 22 December, we estimate that up to 500 people travelled to Australia with a return flight scheduled post-17 January.
4. This briefing provides options for managing the return to New Zealand of those people who travelled to Australia and could reasonably have expected to be able to return home without the need for a MIAS voucher.
5. The briefing covers:
 - a. The impact of the concurrent change of system settings to a ten day stay alongside the delay in Reconnecting New Zealand border changes
 - b. information about the scale of the problem, who has been affected and the number of people seeking to return to New Zealand
 - c. how potential travellers will access information about access to flights, and the process for managing allocating space in MIQ for these travellers
 - d. impact on MIQ facilities and workforce
 - e. plans for a cautious lobby release on 6 January 2022 for the rest of the world
6. There are a number of potential impacts and consequences associated with the proposed approaches; these are described in the second half of this briefing.

Changed system settings mean MIQ will be operating at maximum capacity for most of January and February

7. Full utilisation of MIQ operational capacity for almost all of January and February will result in significant strain on various aspects of the border and MIQ systems. We are currently working to identify and mitigate impacts, including those on the workforce and logistics. There are also impacts on MIQ's ability to accommodate travel from elsewhere in the world or support special cohorts, such as people from Afghanistan.

Cohorting is a critical defence against the Omicron variant and will be retained in facilities where possible.

8. Cohorting is an effective IPC measure and helps prevent in-MIF transmission. While it does mean there is the potential for room wastage as not all rooms can be filled within the 96-hour window, we propose retaining it through this process as much as possible.

9. Cohorting has already been suspended in some facilities as a result of the presence of the Omicron variant on some flights, where whole flight loads have become close contacts.

Maximising utilisation of managed isolation capacity means the system will not be able to respond to unforeseen crises elsewhere

10. With the impact of the 10-day stay and accommodating the identified scope of returnees from Australia, almost all of the emergency room buffer in the MIQ system will be used, limiting our ability to respond to a concurrent event requiring MIQ. This puts at risk our ability to respond to a serious event such as the loss of a facility.
11. Since the commencement of the current outbreak in August, the implementation of Care in the Community and triage approaches by the Ministry of Health and DHBs has substantially reduced the demand for MIQ to manage community cases. However, MIQ still plays an important role in the provision of suitable alternative accommodation in the event that home- and community-based isolation options are not available. A small buffer of MIQ rooms provide regional and inter-regional options to health providers to refer COVID-19 positive cases to MIQ facilities if there is a risk of non-compliance, or if local community-based alternative accommodation options have been exhausted. It is a last port of call before MBIE's Mobile Community Isolation Reserve (prepositioned campervans across the country) are deployed.
12. The continuation of these approaches will be critical, particularly with the shift of one quarantine facility back into an isolation facility, and potential shift of part of another facility. This shift from quarantine to isolation has been required to meet the capacity demand created by the move to a 10-day stay, and to accommodate potential returnees from Australia. It will not be possible to consider reconverting this facility to create additional quarantine capacity, if this is required, until isolation demand reduces. Positive border cases will need to continue to have priority access to quarantine capacity within MIQ, over community cases.
13. This limits the ability of MIQ to scale-up quarantine capacity to meet demand from the community. As at 8am 30 December, 150 quarantine rooms are occupied across New Zealand, from a total of 642.

We have identified a range of impacts on the workforce

14. In order to meet the requirements of managed isolation facilities being at full operational capacity, it is likely that the health surge workforce will be maintained by short term measures which may include the cancellation of leave (particularly in Auckland where the workforce pressures are greatest). In addition, the Ministry of Health is reviewing processes that could be amended to reduce the burden on the registered nursing workforce, for example enabling initial health assessments to be completed by a Health Care Assistant.
15. It is not likely to be feasible to sustain this high level of health resourcing beyond the end of February 2022 due to increasing workforce fatigue. There is a risk that the health workforce may choose to leave for other roles within the sector.

Airlines are being impacted by COVID-19 Omicron

16. We are seeing increasing numbers of flight cancellations around the world because of airline staff being infected with COVID-19 or being close contacts of confirmed cases. Most recently, we understand that Fiji Air has cancelled a number of flights to New Zealand as a result of crew shortages related to COVID-19.
17. Where flights are cancelled and/or rescheduled this can have a material flow on impact in terms of cohorting and/or capacity. For example, a flight that was due to arrive on Day 3 of a cohort that is delayed and arrives the following day may result in a decision to suspend

cohorting so the flight can go into its originally designated facility as it cannot be accommodated elsewhere within cohorting.

The delay to implementing Step One of RNZ has impacted some people who have travelled to Australia since 24 November

18. There is a group of people holding MIAS vouchers for January whose flights are likely to have changed as flight schedules have been adjusted. MIQ is working with airlines and travellers to align vouchers with flights and honour these MIAS vouchers.
19. There are also approximately 50 people who have been identified who were eligible for a group allocation or Time Sensitive Travel but who didn't take up their allocation, and MIQ will work with them to see if they require a voucher.
20. Existing offline voucher allocation pathways continue to be available. This includes emergency allocation requests through MIQ, and rooms for critical health and disability workers through the Ministry of Health (noting that the Ministry of Health will resume processing applications on 10 January for February arrivals).

There are a range of travellers requiring assistance to return to New Zealand from Australia.

21. A number of people have been significantly impacted by the decision to defer the implementation of Step One of Reconnecting New Zealand. Those cohorts that can be quantified include:
 - a. People who travelled to Australia following the Government's announcement on 24 November, and before 22 December, with return tickets to New Zealand from 17 January onwards. These people do not have a MIAS voucher as they had expected to be able to return following the introduction of self-isolation provisions. This is estimated to be up to 370 people.
 - b. People who travelled to Australia before 22 December but after 25 November and, and had a MIAS voucher for travel to New Zealand from 17 January, but who had proactively cancelled this voucher up on the basis that they would no longer need it. This is estimated to be up to 10 people
 - c. People who had a MIAS voucher for travel to New Zealand after 24 November, who cancelled that voucher following Government announcements with a view to utilising self-isolation provisions instead. This is estimated to be up to 200 people, with many having been overseas for a long duration, and likely to prefer to defer travel rather than enter MIQ.
22. There is a further group of people who may have an urgent need to travel to New Zealand, and who had travel booked from 17 January. We do not know the number of people who would fit into this category and seek direction now about your preference for how we respond to those travellers. More information on the choices available to you relating to this group is provided below.
23. Commercial information
24. MIQ is currently working to identify capacity in coming weeks that can be offered to these travellers if they need to travel back to New Zealand through MIQ in January or February rather than waiting for the implementation of Step One.

25. All travellers will be liable for fees, but existing criteria for fee waivers apply.

We are working to identify space within MIQ but capacity is very tight with the lengthened 10-day stays

26. From 23 December 2021, all returnees are required to spend 10 days in MIQ, as opposed to seven days in MIQ and three days in home isolation. The move to a 10-day stay in MIQ has had a significant impact, resulting in approximately 27 per cent less capacity – and requiring us to find an additional 1700 rooms every 28 days for existing commitments to border arrivals. The 500-room operational contingency for both January and February 2022 has already been used to meet this demand.
27. MIQ had already released approximately 8,500 vouchers for January. We are also expecting approximately 715 rooms to be used by Group Allocation and Time Sensitive Travel in January. This consists of:
- a. 380 rooms for the following Groups:
 - i. Refugees (approx 67 rooms)
 - ii. Antarctic workers (approx 205 rooms)
 - iii. Silver Ferns (approx. 23 rooms)
 - iv. Indian Women’s Team Cricket World Cup (approx. 31 rooms + training)
 - v. Expo (approx. 60 rooms)
 - b. approximately 223 rooms for Group ‘sector’ allocations (Health Workers, Exporters, Construction Sector Accord, Sport and Cultural Sector)
 - c. 112 rooms for Time Sensitive Travel
28. MIQ continues to support the arrivals and resettlement of Afghan evacuees and the New Zealand refugee programme, although our ability to meet the ongoing high demand with a number of peaks is constrained. (This is discussed further below)
29. In order to make best use of our capacity, we have taken a number of steps, including: converting the Novotel Ellerslie facility from quarantine facility back to an isolation facility providing an additional 235 rooms. We are also maximising the utilisation of our biggest facility, the Grand Millennium in Auckland with a longer infill/shorter cleaning cycle. We are also considering returning one wing of the Holiday Inn Auckland to managed isolation, if required (approximately 125 rooms).
30. As per standard practice, MIQ will put any unused group ‘sector’ allocations, such as the Export, Construction Accord, and Healthcare workers, and Time Sensitive Travel back into the national pool. We expect this to provide approximately 250 rooms for January, with final numbers to be confirmed in mid-January.
31. There are a small number of days in February where spikes of existing planned intakes exceed or come close to exhausting all capacity within the network as a result of the move to a 10-day cycle. Where these spikes occur close together, they limit MIQ’s ability to accommodate any additional returnees for a full 10-day cycle. MIQ is currently considering options available to ‘smooth’ these spikes of high capacity, including working with some travellers and groups to adjust their arrival dates. We will work hard to minimise the need to break cohorts but may need to do so to manage spikes. We will also seek to build back a level of operational reserve in order to be able to respond future shocks to our capacity (which at peak utilisation can be as “small” as a rescheduled flight).

There are choices about how best to use MIQ capacity

32. MIQ is continuing to work through options for identifying any capacity in January and February.
33. On the basis that we can find additional space, and subject to your agreement that we work with airlines to support some travellers in Australia, we are intending to take the following approach:
 - a. For those who travelled to Australia after 24 November and before 22 December on return tickets (returning between 17 January and 28 February 2022). We propose working with the airlines to match red flights with MIQ availability and allocate a voucher to affected travellers.
 - b. For those who travelled to Australia before 22 December and had a MIAS voucher from 17 January – 28 February but had proactively cancelled their voucher. We propose working with the airlines to match red flights with MIQ availability and allocate a voucher to affected travellers.
 - c. For those travelling from Australia after 24 November, who had given up a MIQ voucher thinking they no longer needed it. We propose working with them to allocate a new voucher aligned to a red flight.
34. For those in the three categories above who are unable to make the proposed red flights, we are considering options for those who have an urgent need to travel (more information below).

Provisions for travellers who have an urgent need to travel to New Zealand

35. While many people with impacted travel plans will have cancelled or delayed travel, we expect there to be a subset for whom travel to New Zealand between 17 January and 28 February is urgent. This would include, for example, people who had planned to relocate to New Zealand, and who may have unchangeable commitments related to housing or work whose lives are significantly and severely impacted by the delay.

Existing emergency allocation provisions

36. Existing emergency allocation categories and processes remain available to all people in Australia who have a time-critical need to travel. These categories encompass situations such as the need to provide care and protection to a child, where a relative is living with a terminal illness, or where a bereavement has been suffered and someone needs to return to New Zealand.
37. Existing emergency allocation criteria and processes relate to the need to travel within the next 14 days, with travellers who are successful in applying for an emergency allocation required to travel within this timeframe.
38. While we have considered extending the emergency allocation window beyond 14 days for people travelling in the window between 17 January and the end of February, we consider that the current mechanism is a fit for purpose approach for people with an urgent need to travel. By their nature, the circumstances captured within the emergency allocation categories are unlikely to be relevant for travel that can be planned a number of weeks in advance.
39. For people who have been severely impacted by the delay, for instance people who have sold their house and have nowhere to live from 17 January, there is the possibility of establishing a bespoke and temporary emergency allocation category, where severe hardship caused by the delay can be proven. However, as this would coincide with MIQ experiencing significant demands on capacity this may come with significant trade offs.

Sufficient “red” flights from Australia are expected to be available

40. Air New Zealand published its revised ‘red’ flight schedule for Australia on 24 December. This has 17 cargo and passenger flights per week, including daily from Sydney and five to six times weekly from Melbourne. This means capacity is likely to significantly exceed room/voucher availability and there will not be the same constraints in matching MIQ availability to flights as when ‘managed return’ flights were operated from New South Wales¹.
41. Qantas will review whether to operate ‘red’ flights (using its twice-weekly cargo flights) once the number of their passengers who qualify for a facilitated return is known. Commercial information

There are other groups of people affected by the delay to the reopening plans for Reconnecting New Zealanders whom we cannot support at the moment

42. The expansion of one-way quarantine-free travel (QFT) to a further five COVID-19 free Pacific jurisdictions is due to commence from 14 February, with some of these travellers likely to require transit through Australia. International relations
43. There are likely to be New Zealanders who had travelled to countries other than Australia following the announcements on 24 November who were planning to return to New Zealand after 14 February when Step Two was expected to commence. At this stage, we do not propose making any provisions as travellers were given two months’ notice of the two-week delay to Step Two. We will revisit at a later date if the RNZ Steps are further delayed.
44. There are likely to be people who had planned to relocate to New Zealand from countries other than Australia after 14 February when Step Two was expected to commence, and who may have plans related to work, accommodation, or schooling for children whose lives are significantly impacted by the delay. At this stage, we do not propose making any provisions as travellers were given two months’ notice of the two week delay to Step Two. We will revisit at a later date if the RNZ Steps are further delayed.
45. We know that there are many offshore New Zealanders who had not been able to secure MIAS vouchers to return to, or visit family in, New Zealand for many months and who, relying on the 24 November announcements, had planned travel following the implementation of Steps 1 or 2.

Afghan evacuees and Quota Refugees

46. We continue to support the resettlement of evacuees from Afghanistan. MIQ is currently in discussions with MFAT and Immigration NZ about the need to more actively manage arrivals from Afghanistan in January and February because the volume of arrivals has been significantly higher than originally forecast. The extended length of stay for all arrivals means that MIQ no longer has capacity to accommodate these arrivals at existing volumes.

Commercial information

47. There are a large number of Afghanistan evacuees expected in the near future which were not included in the initial forecasting. This makes planning in the current environment difficult without putting some limitations in place to manage the flow. The increase in numbers are listed below:
- a. approx. 100 emergency visas issued by the Associate Minister of Immigration
 - b. visas being issued as a result of the Immigration Judicial review
 - c. 100 undocumented arrivals International relations expected in January 2022
 - d. 362 undocumented arrivals International relations expected to arrive from January 2022
 - e. 400 undocumented arrivals who are expected to make movement between January and April 2022.
48. Afghan evacuees and quota refugees are usually accommodated at the Naumi Managed Isolation Facility where we are able to provide the wraparound support required. Based on current demand modelling, we would not be able to support peak arrivals, including large groups expected to arrive from Iran in January.
49. As directed by the Minister for COVID-19 Response, arrivals from Afghanistan are currently provided MIQ rooms under the Emergency Allocation mechanism. There has also been scope to use contingency rooms. MIQ rooms are prioritised for those departing Afghanistan due to the dire security and humanitarian situation they are leaving behind. In the absence of an ability to enter New Zealand, officials would be unable to assist people out of Afghanistan.
50. In addition, Border Ministers approved a group allocation of approximately 100 quota refugees through the UN resettlement programme every 6 weeks from July 2021 to end June 2022. Owing to a number of issues, including extended periods of time in Levels 3 and 4 since July, the flow of refugees has not met the proposed quota and therefore greater numbers of refugees need to enter MIQ between January and June 2022 to meet the agreed quota.
51. At this point, MIQ is working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration New Zealand to confirm the rooms available to these groups each fortnight in January and February, and we are working to make more rooms available with scope to increase from March 2022.
52. Further advice will be provided on this in January 2022.

We are planning a cautious lobby release on 6 January 2022

53. The scheduled lobby release of 1500 rooms over January, February and March was due to occur on 21 December, and was subsequently deferred until 6 January. We are anticipating high demand for the 6 January release.
54. At this point, we are still determining the capacity and timing of rooms that will be able to be released on 6 January but it is likely to be a small release (approximately 1400 rooms). We are likely to release a small number of vouchers for March and April over the next two to three voucher releases. There may be limited capacity to release a very small number vouchers (less than 200) in January for a small number of dates where facilities are not under excessive pressure.

Legal professional privilege

Government communications are critical

57. Clear and consistent government-led communications will continue to be critical. We need to ensure travellers know where they can go to get information from an authoritative source on the availability of MIQ vouchers.
58. Airlines need to be able to provide clear messaging to passengers. Travellers should not be directed to contact their airlines by government sources until airlines have had the opportunity to confirm flight schedules, crewing arrangements and their own internal mechanisms for allocating bookings and seats.
59. Airlines have emphasised the need for consistent messaging about the overall level of MIQ availability. Those wanting to return may need to wait until Step One of Reconnecting New Zealanders commences at the end of February or when it is deemed safe to do so.
60. We intend to provide key messages through the MIQ website on Friday 31 December.

Next steps

61. We recommend that the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Ministers of Transport, Immigration, Foreign Affairs, Associate Minister of Health (Hon Ayesha Verrall) and the Associate Minister of Immigration be provided a copy of this paper, once you have considered it, for their information.
62. We are working at-pace to finalise the number of travellers impacted by these proposals. We expect to be able to provide your office with an update of work underway between MIQ, Air New Zealand and Qantas to reconcile the number of people falling into various categories by 5pm tomorrow.
63. Subject to your decisions, we anticipate that a number of further operational issues will need to be worked through which we will keep your office updated on.