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Tēnā koe John

Official Information Act request 2223-0324 - Request for information regarding citizenship processing

Thank you for your Official Information Act (Act) request received by the Department of Internal Affairs (Department) on 21 October 2021.

You requested –

- 1. When was the online system automated checks first implemented? (Month and year) And became fully operational?*
- 2. Please inform which automated check was implemented in which month and year (Example: Photo Check on October 2021)*
- 3. What happens to the citizenship applications by grant in the queue after a new automated check is implemented?*
- 4. How many errors did the automated check process presented while it was implemented. How did the department made sure it didn't affect the applicants?*
- 5. Please provide a timeline, with month and year, of the new developments and upgrades to the online system (according to your statement).*
- 6. How many online system improvements and upgrades will be fully operational before Christmas this year?*
- 7. Your website says: "The introduction of automated checks has already significantly reduced average processing times, and we expect this to continue to reduce the backlog of applications." What was the average processing times before the automated checks and what are the current average processing times? How much was the difference? What has changed?*
- 8. Your website says: "We brought in a team of temporary staff to process the applications left in the old system, freeing up permanent staff to increase proficiency and speed in the online system." Are those temporary staff still working to reduce the backlog or were dismissed? If dismissed, what is the department plan to maintain the backlog reduction with less staff? (Please detail).*

In response to your request, I can provide you with the following information.

It is important to explain that the online case management system has been fully operational since it was first implemented in November 2021.

It has always been designed to be enhanced and developed as data becomes available. We have been increasingly using automation to verify identity and confirm applicants meet the criteria for citizenship and intend to continue to refine it, and to use the data available to assess more aspects of an application.

The more we assess via automation, the less checking by our staff is required, and the faster we will be able to process all applicants.

In September 2021 we began using automated checks to improve the management of workflow. Initially, this was to identify applications which could be safely worked on by newly trained Life and Identity Services Officers (LISOs), who had been brought on to help deal with a backlog of applications that had arisen in the transition between the old and new systems, which was exacerbated by the challenges of COVID-19.

Since that time a series of automated checks have been run periodically across all applications to triage these into separate queues based on the amount of manual intervention required, and the training of staff available process them.

Different LISOs are allocated to work in different queues, depending on their skill and experience level and the amount of manual intervention required. Organising work into separate queues can result in variations in the age of applications and processing timeframes within each queue.

The Department's general approach to processing citizenship applications is that the oldest applications are allocated first within each queue. Applications in queues requiring less manual intervention can generally be processed faster.

When a new automated check is introduced, or an existing check is refined, it is applied to all applications in the system, regardless of when the application was received. Within each queue the system allocates applications by the date of receipt of the application (and not the date the automated check was run). This means that applicants who applied earlier are not disadvantaged, and if the new (or refined) automated check confirms they meet requirements they will be triaged into the appropriate expedited queue.

You have asked "how many errors did the automated check process presented while it was implemented. How did the department made sure it didn't affect the applicants?"

I acknowledge that our answer [of 21 September](#) described applications which were not able to be confirmed as meeting a check via automated assessment as 'failing' a check. It is more accurate to say that the automation confirmed an application met a requirement, or that it required further assessment.

It may be helpful if I outline how the automated checks work. Data in Immigration New Zealand’s Application Management System is retrieved using an API, and then an algorithm applies rules to filter applications which clearly meet one or more checks. In effect, the algorithms we use are looking for instances where it can be determined that an applicant clearly meets one or more requirement.

The automated checks can only confirm a requirement is clearly met. They do not confirm a requirement is not met. If there is any uncertainty the application waits for assessment by a LISO in the general queue who looks at all the information and they may contact the applicant if required. It is important to note that no person is declined a grant of citizenship based solely on automated checks.

As time has progressed some of the algorithms have been able to be refined, to be able to pick up more instances where an applicant meets a requirement. When this occurs, the applicant is triaged into the appropriate queue, and processed in order based on the date they applied.

The impact on an applicant if their application cannot be assessed using automated checks is that their application waits in the general queue for assessment by a suitably experienced LISO. We acknowledge that the wait is currently longer than is ideal and we are working hard to reduce this. We expect to make significant progress in coming months.

Part of our work includes ongoing work to refine the algorithms based on what we are learning and looking for other ways we can automate assessment.

We first started using automated checks to route applications in September 2021. A further breakdown of these system enhancements can be found in the table below:

Table one	
September 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New processing approach where work was set aside for newly trained LISOs to process, based on the result of a set of automated checks which used data held at Immigration New Zealand retrieved by API to confirm a requirement, or identify aspects where manual review was required. Colloquially described as “Bucket 1” - Applications (which had not been moved to “bucket 1”) remained in a general queue to be allocated to LISOs who had comprehensive training in all citizenship application types. - Applications remain in the general “Bucket 2” queue until filtered using algorithms into the Bucket 1 queue.
April 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An expedited process created “Bucket 3” for applications that passed a range of automated checks of eligibility, identity, and had no issues which required manual assessment.
May 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Auto-population of ‘Primary Nationality’ field - Auto-population of ‘Name Type’ field - Buckets four and five created

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bucket four is for applications made by Samoan citizens - Bucket five is for applications that pass all automated checks except for one, which is manually checked.
June 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - External check results automatically updated in system.
August 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Auto-population of 'Meets English requirement' field
September 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Auto-population of 'Presence' and 'Residence status' fields

There are currently no further system enhancements or automated checks scheduled for the remainder of 2022.

Improvements in average processing times

These automated checks have resulted in an average 104 working day decrease (42%) since before the automated checks were implemented. The below table provides you with a breakdown of monthly average of working days from when an application is received until an outcome is provided, for the year to date:

Table two	
Month	Average working days taken from when an application is received until an outcome is provided
Jan-22	234
Feb-22	238
Mar-22	250
Apr-22	217
May-22	160
Jun-22	186
Jul-22	143
Aug-22	158
Sep-22	153
Oct-22	146

The team of temporary LISOs completed the backlog of applications in the old system at the end of October 2022. They have since been re-trained in processing applications in the new case management system and are currently a part of the team who work on citizenship applications.

You may be interested to know that while there have been some members of the team who have left and moved on to other roles, there are also a large portion of the team who have become permanent staff. Those still on temporary contracts have been extended through till 31st March 2023.

As this information may be of interest to other members of the public, the Department has decided to proactively release a copy of this response on the DIA website. All requestor data, including your name and contact details, will be removed prior to release. The released response will be made available here: <https://www.dia.govt.nz/Official-Information-Act-Requests-2>.

You have the right to seek an investigation and review by the Ombudsman of this decision. Information about how to make a complaint is available at www.ombudsman.parliament.nz or freephone 0800 802 602.

Ngā mihi



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