



9 June 2021

45 Pipitea Street, Wellington 6011

Phone +64 4 495 7200

ED Hirsch
fyi-request-15427-
989b94cd@requests.fyi.org.nz

dia.govt.nz

Dear Mr Hirsch

Official Information Act 1982 request 2021-0654 – Citizenship processing timeframes

Thank you for your Official Information Act (Act) request received by the Department of Internal Affairs (Department) on 11 May 2021.

You requested –

I write in partial follow-up to your response to OIA request 2021 0453 regarding citizenship processing timelines that I have accessed via FYI.

In the appendix to your response to that request, you provide a graph of average days to be assigned to a case officer. I note an extremely large jump from December (~80 days) to February (~140 days). In your answer, you suggest that this was caused by COVID as well as a new system installed in October 2019.

My goal is to understand as precisely as possible the causes for this increase. 'COVID' is a very general explanation. Given that, I request (under the OIA act) any documents that you have which set out the precise and specific causes of the increase.

Similarly, I would also like to understand what, if anything, is being done to redress it and would request any documents that you have internally about plans to reduce the time taken to assign cases to a case officer.

I use documents very broadly: email as well as written documentation should count.

In response to the first part of your request I can provide you with the following documentation relating to the specific caused of the increase:

- Appendix A – Page 6, IA Status Report WE 12 May 2021

The IA Status Report is a weekly update from the Department to the Minister of Internal Affairs, that details the progress being made on the priority projects in her portfolio.

Some information in this documentation is being withheld under the following provisions of the Act:

- *9(2)(a) of the Act; the withholding of the information is necessary to protect the privacy of natural persons.*

Please note that any information that is deemed to be out of scope will also be withheld and marked as such.

While we have only identified the above document to be in scope of this part your request, I am able to provide you with the following information that will help explain the reasons for the increase in allocation time.

In your email you referred to the graph provided in response to OIA request 2021-0453, which shows the 'Average length of time for citizenship applications to be assigned by a case officer'. This graph demonstrates a rise in the average number of days it took to assign citizenship applications to case officers from December 2020. However, it is important to explain that the horizontal line on the graph trending upwards over time reflects the accumulation of applications that created the backlog, and subsequently picked up by case officers to process.

The average number of days taken to assign an application to a case officer is recorded at the date an application is assigned. This means that unassigned applications are not counted in the line in the graph.

The first reason for the increase in allocation time is that the Department accepts applications at appointments. Prior to December, applications accepted at appointment were assigned to a case officer who began processing the application immediately. The Department recognised that this was prioritising applications received at appointments above those received by mail or submitted online. Because of this, the Department changed its processes in December 2020.

While applications are still accepted at appointments, those applications are now put in the same queue to be assigned as other paper applications. While these applications were small in volume, they did impact the average working days from date submitted to date assigned to a case officer.

The second reason is that in December 2020 the Department started pushing to clear the backlog of applications and did so by ensuring that case officers were assigned the oldest file waiting to be allocated.

The Department allocated several team members to work solely on these older citizenship applications pending in the backlog. This push meant that more of the older applications were assigned to team members working on citizenship by grant applications across those months. The increase in allocation time from December 2020 depicted in the graph reflects when those case officers began processing the older applications.

In response to the second part of your request for documents about plans to reduce the time taken to assign applications to case officers, I can provide you with the following documentation:

- Appendix B – Page 3, IA Status Report WE 17 March 2021

Some information in this documentation is being withheld under the following provisions of the Act:

- *9(2)(a) of the Act; the withholding of the information is necessary to protect the privacy of natural persons.*

It is also important to explain that reducing the processing time for applications is a key focus area for the Department, which includes reducing the time taken to allocate applications to case officers. We expect a combination of measures to achieve a reduction in the processing timeframes in the coming months.

The Department has recently redeployed some passport processing staff and trained them in citizenship processing tasks. A further 11 FTEs will be trained in citizenship processing in the coming two months. This, along with progressive developments in the new online system will hopefully see a positive impact in reducing citizenship processing timeframes.

I understood your request for all documents to include emails, however preliminary scoping established that there were thousands of emails that referred to the citizenship backlog and processing delays. This would require the Department to review all emails retrieved as a part of this search to establish which of those would fall within scope.

Therefore, I must refuse this part of your request under section 18(f) of the Act; that the information requested cannot be made available without substantial collation or research.

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.

Yours sincerely



Julia Taylor
Manager Operational Policy and Official Correspondence
Service Delivery and Operations