



11 October 2021

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[dia.govt.nz](http://dia.govt.nz)

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Dear Daniel

**Official Information Act 1982 request 2122-0176 – Citizenship ceremonies and processing timeframes**

Thank you for your Official Information Act (Act) request received by the Department of Internal Affairs (Department) on the 26 August 2021 and 13 September 2021, respectively.

On 16 September 2021, the Department advised that due to the similar nature of your requests, it considered your second request to be an amendment to your initial request under section 15(1AA) of the Act.

You requested –

- 1. Is not feasible for DIA to organize a virtual citizenship ceremony and post the certificates?*
- 2. Why not the DIA department is opting for virtual ceremonies for citizenship as other countries (Australia, US and Canada) are doing for clearing the backlog?*
- 3. Why not the DIA department is giving an option to an applicant whether he/she wants to attend the actual or virtual citizenship ceremony in this Covid time?*
- 4. Why only people with citizenship ceremony invites gets the Citizenship Certificate by Post? (During Lockdown) Why not people with approved citizenship gets the certificate by post? (During Lockdown).*
- 5. Why not DIA ask to approved applicants what they want during this lockdown (Ceremony or Certificate by Post) and then hold applicants according to the answer?*
- 6. As this Covid variant is more infectious and also some mystery cases are coming every day, assume the lockdown (Level 3 and 4) will impose for next 6 months, so DIA will not conduct ceremony and hold the approved applicants till DIA conduct a ceremony, how this will help DIA to clear the backlog of the citizenship applications?*
- 7. What solutions DIA is planning to overcome this lost time (lockdown time) for processing the citizenship applications faster? Example: Working during December (Except public holidays), Conducting ceremonies starting from Jan 2022 instead of March 2022, etc*
- 8. As DIA department tries to clear the backlog, then how the backlog will clear if they will hold the certificates for all approved citizenship applications and wait to open the lockdown to conduct ceremonies?*
- 9. Currently which month applications are assigned to the case officers?*
- 10. Number of new trained staff hired for the citizenship applications?*

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

### ***Questions one, two and three***

I can advise that the Department did consider the option of virtual ceremonies, and took account of what other countries were doing, such as Canada and Australia. However initial research and public engagement indicated that people saw attending the citizenship ceremony in person as an important part of the process, and a virtual ceremony was akin to no ceremony at all.

It is also important to explain that the current pause in ceremonies due to public health reasons is not one of the causes of the citizenship backlog. The backlog is caused by several other factors, as explained to you in response to your request OIA 2122-0213. In this instance, virtual ceremonies would divert key resources that the Department could otherwise use to reduce this backlog.

### ***Questions four, five and six***

Section 11 of the Citizenship Act 1977 provides that the Minister of Internal Affairs may, in such case or class of cases as the Minister thinks fit, make the grant of New Zealand citizenship conditional upon the applicant taking an oath of allegiance, or making an affirmation to similar effect. Unless the Minister agrees otherwise, the oath or affirmation must be taken or made at a public citizenship ceremony.

The current Minister of Internal Affairs makes almost all applications for the grant of citizenship conditional upon the applicant taking the oath or affirmation of allegiance at a public ceremony. Some exceptions to this are where the applicant requires citizenship urgently, and a public ceremony is not scheduled within the required timeframe, or where an applicant is under 16 years of age. The requirement is also waived where Covid-19 alert levels make a large public ceremony impractical or contrary to public health advice.

It is first important to explain that local councils set the dates and times for citizenship ceremonies, which is dependent on having sufficient numbers to meet their minimum requirements. The Department liaises with councils on the estimated numbers, and the councils will then set the appropriate date.

When citizenship ceremonies are cancelled for public health reasons, the requirement to swear the oath or affirmation of allegiance is waived, and applicants approved for a grant of New Zealand citizenship receive that grant as at the date of approval. Citizenship certificates are then mailed to those individuals.

The process of mailing out a citizenship certificate is similar to allocating an applicant to a ceremony, as it is done in order of approval. Those who have been allocated to a ceremony that has been cancelled due to public health reasons will have their certificates issued and sent in order of approval.

The Department is yet to decide what process will be going forward with the ongoing Covid-19 Alert Level changes, however I can assure you that our customers will be updated as and when a decision is made.

### **Questions seven and eight**

The Department's current plans to reduce the backlog of citizenship applications will tackle the time that has been lost in the various alert level changes. Unfortunately, as with all of New Zealand, there have been factors beyond our control and we are constantly adapting to ensure we work in the most efficient way possible. The specific programme of work includes more training, investing in technology changes to speed processing up, and establishing a temporary workforce dedicated to working through the backlog of applications.

As I explained in response to questions one, two, and three, the postponing and cancellation of citizenship ceremonies has no bearing on the current citizenship backlog.

### **Question nine**

The oldest application allocated to a staff member in September 2021 was received in October 2020. As at 1 October 2021, the majority of citizenship by grant applications the Department is currently working on were received in late November 2020. Timeframes for processing citizenship by grant are regularly updated at [Application timeframes | New Zealand Government \(www.govt.nz\)](https://www.govt.nz/application-timeframes).

### **Question ten**

The Department has recently hired 22 new Life and Identity Services Officers (LISOs) who are in various stages of being trained in processing citizenship applications. A total of 15 of these LISOs are temporary staff who have been brought in to help clear the paper-based backlog.

### **Further comments**

Again, I would like to acknowledge your frustration surrounding the current citizenship processing times and wish to reassure you the Department has initiatives underway to reduce the citizenship application backlog, speed up processing, and improve general customer experience.

I note that the Department is also in the process of responding to an additional request that you have submitted regarding citizenship, further to your previous requests. It is important to explain that the Department has no further information to provide regarding the citizenship backlog and processing timeframes, and considers the responses already provided to you to have been comprehensive.

Because of this, the Department would like to reiterate that it does not believe any further information can be provided to you beyond what already has been released.

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](http://www.ombudsman.parliament.nz) or freephone 0800 802 602.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'J' followed by a series of loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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