



3 December 2021

Ref: OIA-2021/22-0557

Dear [REDACTED]

Official Information Act request relating to the very high-risk country classification

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received on 6 November 2021. You requested:

Why are countries such as US & UK with higher positivity rate, death rate & case numbers not in the VHR list?

Why are positive cases from the community allowed to isolate at home & people who are double vaccinated & who return a negative test asked to isolate at MIQ?

Currently, we are seeing a resurgence of COVID-19 happening in a number of countries, and there are further waves of infections in many countries as new variants of the COVID-19 virus arise. This means New Zealand expects to see more returnees with COVID-19 arriving at the border. This increase in cases will place pressure on our managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) system and increase the risk of a community outbreak. This is particularly important as countries deal with the ongoing impacts of the Delta variant, as well as the arrival of the recently identified Omicron variant.

The New Zealand Government has responded by creating the 'very high risk' (VHR) designation to significantly reduce the number of people with COVID-19 flying to New Zealand. The Government continues to review this decision regularly.

As mentioned in my response to your request under the Act, dated 5 November 2021, the criteria for considering VHR designation takes into consideration a broad range of factors including, but not limited to:

- The number of positive cases as a percentage of arrivals into New Zealand;
- Whether cases in the country are rising rapidly, and the predominant strain (i.e. the variant of concern);
- The level of confidence in the country's health system capacity and its testing measures; and
- Vaccination coverage rates in the country.

Officials also consider data and information from a range of publicly available international sources relating to the global situation on a regular basis. This information changes rapidly as the COVID-19 situation develops overseas.

Since receiving your request, there have been a number of changes to the list of countries designated as VHR. A number of South African countries have been added to the list after the discovery of the Omicron variant of COVID-19. Additionally, Brazil, Fiji, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan are no longer designated as very high risk.

Along with the changes to the VHR list, the New Zealand Government also announced changes to the MIQ system. From January 2022, fully vaccinated New Zealanders can begin travelling to New Zealand without entering MIQ as part of the Government's 3-step plan for reconnecting New Zealand to the world. The plan is as follows:

1. Opening to fully vaccinated New Zealand citizens and other travellers eligible under our current settings from **Australia** — from 11:59 pm on 16 January 2022 (provided they have been in Australia or New Zealand for the past 14 days).
2. Opening to fully vaccinated New Zealand citizens and other travellers eligible under our current settings from **all but very high risk countries** — from 11:59pm on Sunday 13 February 2022.
3. Opening to fully vaccinated **foreign nationals** — from 30 April 2022 onwards.

Although double vaccinated travellers will no longer have to go into MIQ, there will still be a number of requirements individuals will need to meet before and after they enter New Zealand. You can find the full list of requirements on the Unite against COVID-19 website (covid19.govt.nz/alert-levels-and-updates/latest-updates/reconnecting-new-zealand-the-next-steps/).

You have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate and review my decision under section 28(3) of the Act.

This response will be published on the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's website during our regular publication cycle. Typically, information is released monthly, or as otherwise determined. Your personal information including name and contact details will be removed for publication.

Yours sincerely



Cheryl Barnes
Deputy Chief Executive, COVID-19 Response