

# Covid 19 coronavirus: Staff shortage forces 'absolute limit' on MIQ

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The Government has announced 500 spaces a fortnight in managed isolation will be allocated over the next 10 months - the majority for skilled and critical workers.

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Dire staff shortages are preventing the creation of new MIQ spaces or a permanent, purpose-built quarantine facility, Government briefings reveal.

The shortages have hampered repeated attempts to find alternatives to our hotel-based managed isolation regime, due to the risk of a devastating community outbreak of Covid-19.

Debate has intensified in the last few days over how and when New Zealand should reopen its borders to the rest of the world as the global vaccination rollout gathers pace, and the New South Wales outbreak grows worse, putting travel bubble arrangements at risk.

Now documents released to the Herald under the Official Information Act show officials have been considering long-term purpose-built MIQs since July last year.

But each time a new idea was floated, it hit a brick wall: the country does not have the health or security staff to sustain more MIQ places and building new purpose-built MIQ spots could create as many problems as it would solve.

National has been calling on the Government to establish a purpose-built, permanent MIQ facility since the beginning of the year.

Though Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins was initially dismissive, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern now says ministers are thinking about the "arrangements we might have in future" and "what kind of capacity we might need".

What Ministers are considering is potentially less like a barracks-style "purpose-built" facility in the country, and more like purchasing and remodelling a hotel building closer to large cities.

Hipkins said that in the future the Government would "be canvassing a range of options".

"It might be that we buy one or two of our existing facilities and do more work to convert them so they're more fit-for-purpose. No decisions have been made at this stage."

In July 2020, just months after the first MIQ facilities opened in April, officials at MBIE and the Ministry of Health looked at ideas for more permanent MIQ arrangements.

Many options were considered, but ultimately junked as being less feasible and safe than hotel-based quarantine.

"Communal barrack-style accommodation" didn't meet health guidelines because of its "very basic facilities, logistics challenges," and "limited locations spread over large distances".

Campervans also didn't meet the standard; they had a "large security footprint", meaning they would be difficult to secure should returnees look to sneak out, unlike hotels, which only have a handful of entrances and exits.

Campervans also presented their own "logistics" and "public health challenges", with officials saying "it would be difficult to provide basic services to people in campervans such as laundry, catering, and bathroom facilities".

Using cruise ships was quickly dismissed over "significant infection risks" due to their ventilation systems.

The closest officials have come to recommending a move beyond the hotel-based system was when they considered "bespoke MIQ apartments" - self-catered apartment-style accommodation.

This also failed to get off the ground, as it was difficult to find apartments that could be completely taken over by MIQ without evicting permanent residents.

Another idea was to look at smaller "bespoke" MIQ arrangements, which might even be offered to people for a fee (at this time, the Government had yet to introduce its \$3000 charge for some returnees).

But this option ran into a roadblock that bedevilled all plans to expand MIQ - a lack of staff.

Ironically, MIQ, which is often held responsible for restricting the flow of labour into the country, was itself a victim of the labour shortage.

A "key constraint for increasing capacity for MIQ is the availability of workforce to provide wrap-around services, such as health care workers and security guards.

"Appropriate health workforce, and laboratory testing capacity needs to be available to MIQ facilities without undermining the provision of broader health and disability services," officials said.

"Even if additional new types of accommodation can be found, these workforce constraints remain and are likely to place an absolute limit on the supply of MIQ spaces unless they can be addressed," they said.

Early on, officials were also looking at ways to improve the sustainability of MIQ. One option was to increase the supply of MIQ spaces, but officials also considered ways of reducing demand.

Options thrown up included the suggestion that the Government could incentivise people to not return to New Zealand and stay where they were, although there were fears this might not comply with the Bill of Rights.

Officials suggested "understanding and influencing the factors that push New Zealanders to return, including visa status and financial situation".

Officials also considered the idea of allowing people to isolate offshore, before arriving in New Zealand, as well as allowing arrivals from low-risk countries to isolate at home or skip quarantine altogether.

None of these options appears to have been seriously considered.

As the pandemic wore on, the Government has been approached by several private providers keen to build and sometimes operate MIQs.

Ideas have ranged from dedicated MIQs to bring in people for a specific industry, an idea to build MIQs that would then be run by the Government, and run an MIQ facility that would charge returnees and turn a profit.

One proposal was even for a seven star hotel for high net worth individuals who might be attracted to invest in post-pandemic New Zealand.

The Government has considered these models, but again decided they weren't suitable. One idea floated was to stand up a Government department in charge of auditing private MIQs to ensure they were up to standard.

But this too would present labour problems, with officials saying that public servants who would be doing that auditing are already tied up in other parts of the Covid response, like the trans-Tasman bubble.

Officials have also recommended that it was safer for the Government to own and operate its own MIQs.

"From a risk management perspective, the safest option would be for the Government to maintain a leadership role in the establishment and running of all MIQ facilities regardless of their configuration" officials said.

National's Bishop said he still believes a "purpose-built facility makes sense".

"MIQ of some form will be for some time to come. This would be a facility in the national interest and worth the investment," he said.