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Immigration
New Zealand:
Managing how it
makes decisions
about skilled
residence visas



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Immigration New Zealand: Managing how it makes decisions about skilled residence visas

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Auditor-General's overview

E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e ngā karangarangatanga maha o te motu, tēnā koutou.

Immigration has played, and continues to play, a significant role in shaping New Zealand socially, culturally, and economically. Ensuring that the country has people with the skills needed to support communities to thrive is an important function of a modern immigration system.

Skilled residence visa applications make up a small proportion of the total number of visa applications processed each year, but these applicants are a strategically important group who are in demand internationally. It is important that these applicants' experiences of applying for visas are well-managed because skilled residence visa systems can give countries a competitive edge in the global skills market.

Effective visa systems are timely, clear, and fair. They give confidence to migrants, to the public, and to employers who need the skills that migrants bring. This means that alongside its role to process visa applications and manage immigration risks, Immigration New Zealand can influence skilled migrants' decisions about whether to live and work here.

Given the importance of skilled migrants and the number of recent changes to the skilled residence visa system, I wanted to see how well Immigration New Zealand, which is part of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, manages how it makes decisions about whether to grant skilled residence visas. I particularly wanted to know how well the process works for applicants, who are likely to have many countries to choose from when deciding where to settle.

I also wanted to know how well Immigration New Zealand communicates its performance. Regular, relevant reporting promotes an understanding of how well the immigration system is working and can inform longer-term workforce planning and policy.

What we found

Immigration New Zealand has been taking steps to provide better information and support for applicants across the wide range of visas that it processes. This programme of work is in its early stages, but we saw a strong commitment by Immigration New Zealand to improving the experience of its applicants and to managing the quality of decision-making.

However, Immigration New Zealand does not have a specific focus on understanding how **skilled residence applicants** are moving through its decision-making process. This makes it hard for Immigration New Zealand to know whether its processes are working effectively for skilled residence applicants, and hard to report effectively on how well this part of the immigration process is working.

For example, Immigration New Zealand's ways of measuring applicant sentiment, such as complaints data and satisfaction surveys, do not separately identify applicants for skilled residence visas. This makes it difficult for Immigration New Zealand to know what improvements to processes it could make to strengthen the country's ability to attract and retain this sought-after group of migrants.

Information that is specifically focused on the skilled residence visa system would help Immigration New Zealand to understand and report on whether the skilled residence visa system is working as expected, including how well it is meeting the country's long-term skills needs.

What we recommend

The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's customer promise, Te Kī Taurangi, commits to interactions with customers that are simple, safe, and certain. I have made five recommendations that will support Immigration New Zealand to meet this promise for applicants for skilled residence visas.

The recommendations require more focus on the needs of this specific group of applicants. Making these improvements will require shifts in the way that Immigration New Zealand thinks about applicants for skilled residence visas and their place in the wider immigration system, alongside its regulatory role.

In my view, these shifts are necessary if skilled residence visa processing is to work more effectively and its benefits to New Zealand are to be maximised.

I thank staff in Immigration New Zealand and the wider Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment for their assistance with this audit. I am also grateful to the other people we heard from, who have interests in the skilled residence visa system, for their contribution to our work.

Nāku noa, nā



John Ryan
Controller and Auditor-General | Tumuaki o te Mana Arotake

7 November 2024

Our recommendations

We recommend that the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, which Immigration New Zealand is a part of:

1. prioritise work to enable applicants for skilled residence visas to easily track application progress and to enable the smooth transfer of applicants between different types of visas;
2. include a specific focus on skilled residence visas in all aspects of its monitoring of, and reporting on, the visa system;
3. make better use of the information it already collects to monitor the effectiveness of the skilled residence visa system for specific groups of applicants and to help it target improvements;
4. review its approach to reporting on the performance of the immigration system to ensure that applicants, Parliament, and the public can gain a clear understanding of how well the skilled residence visa system is performing; and
5. develop an approach to reviewing and reporting on the long-term outcomes of the skilled residence visa system that will allow Immigration New Zealand, Parliament, and the public to see how well the system is working to attract and retain the skills that New Zealand needs over time.

1

Why we looked at skilled residence visas

- 1.1 Skilled migrants fill long-term workforce needs and help to keep New Zealand’s economy working well. They are a strategic priority for New Zealand in a globally competitive market for people with highly sought-after skills.
- 1.2 Immigration New Zealand, which is a part of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), manages the process for making decisions about applications for skilled residence visas.
- 1.3 Decisions about visas need to support New Zealand’s safety and security at the same time as ensuring that an applicant does not have to wait too long for a decision about their visa. Migrants, their advisers, employers, and the public also need to be confident that the immigration system is processing visas fairly and consistently and is monitored effectively, using reliable information.
- 1.4 Keeping all these elements in balance is important for effectively managing the skilled residence visa system.
- 1.5 People with the skills the economy needs for the longer term tend to have choices about where to settle and can be in high demand in many countries. Whether these migrants connect to and decide to settle in New Zealand can be influenced by the experience of applying for a visa.

Skilled residence visas are a small but significant part of the immigration system

- 1.6 Skilled residence visas are a strategically significant part of the wider immigration system, but they form a small proportion of the applications that Immigration New Zealand processes overall. In 2023, Immigration New Zealand made decisions about 892,164 applications for visas.¹ Of these, 12,231 were applications for skilled residence visas.²
- 1.7 In its 2022 report *Immigration: Fit for the future*, the New Zealand Productivity Commission considered the global context for highly skilled migration. It pointed out that highly skilled migrants are more mobile than other groups of migrants. They can choose to go elsewhere, particularly if other countries make their paths to residence clearer and easier.³
- 1.8 Recognising the choices that potential migrants have, New Zealand recently changed its skilled residence visa settings (see paragraphs 2.18-2.33).

1 See “Immigration New Zealand’s achievements in 2023” at immigration.govt.nz.

2 This figure is for the number of individual decisions, not the number of people covered by those decisions. It is the total number of applications decided for skilled residence visas (Skilled Migrant, Straight to Residence, Skilled Migrant Category, Green List Work to Residence, Care Workforce Work to Residence, and Transport Work to Residence visa types). See the Statistics section of the Immigration New Zealand website at immigration.govt.nz.

3 New Zealand Productivity Commission (2022), *Immigration – Fit for the future*, page 61, at treasury.govt.nz.

- 1.9 Other countries have also considered changing their immigration systems for the same reason. In October 2023, the Canadian Government published a plan to strengthen its immigration system, including maintaining its status as a “destination of choice”.⁴
- 1.10 In December 2023, the Australian Government published a migration strategy that recognised that it needed to change its current visa system because there was “a danger that migrants with the skills we most need are likely to turn their attention to other countries with better managed systems”.⁵

What we looked at

- 1.11 We looked at how effectively Immigration New Zealand manages how it makes decisions about whether to grant skilled residence visas. We particularly wanted to know how well the system works for applicants.
- 1.12 By “skilled residence visas”, we mean the following skilled residence pathways:
- Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visas;
 - the “Green List”, including Straight to Residence Visas for occupations on Tier 1 of the Green List and Work to Residence Visas for occupations on Tier 2 of the Green List; and
 - Care Workforce Work to Residence Visas and Transport Work to Residence Visas.⁶
- 1.13 In some instances, we identify a category of visas where it is important for context.
- 1.14 When we refer to the “skilled residence visa system”, we mean the part of the immigration system that processes applications for skilled residence visas. The “process” is the steps that an application moves through, from when someone submits an application to when Immigration New Zealand decides whether to grant a visa.

4 Government of Canada (2023), *An immigration system for Canada's future: A plan to get us there*, at [canada.ca](https://www.canada.ca).

5 Australian Government (2023), *Migration strategy: Getting migration working for the nation. For workers. For business. For all Australians*, page 11, at [homeaffairs.gov.au](https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au).

6 On 7 April 2024, the Government changed the eligibility requirements for the Transport Work to Residence Visa. As at 8 August 2024, the approved work to residence roles for this category are ship's master and deck hand. From 7 April 2024, Immigration New Zealand stopped accepting new visa applications for bus driver, truck driver, aircraft refueller, furniture removalist, tanker driver, and tow truck driver.

- 1.15 Our audit focused on three main questions about how well Immigration New Zealand manages applications for skilled residence visas. We wanted to know how effectively Immigration New Zealand:
- manages the process of making decisions about whether to grant skilled residence visas;
 - manages the quality of decision-making about applications for skilled residence visas; and
 - uses information to improve its decision-making about applications for skilled residence visas.

What we did not look at

- 1.16 We did not look at Immigration New Zealand's management of visa types other than skilled residence visas. However, we did look at some projects and initiatives intended for all visa applicants to understand how they specifically related to skilled residence applicants.
- 1.17 We talked to people who are licensed to give immigration advice to applicants, but we did not talk to applicants for skilled residence visas and we do not comment on specific decisions about individual applications. In keeping with our mandate, we do not comment on the appropriateness of eligibility requirements for visas or wider immigration policy settings.

How we carried out our audit

- 1.18 To carry out our audit, we:
- collected and reviewed information from publicly available documents and from documents that MBIE provided;
 - reviewed a wide range of documents and data relating to monitoring and reporting on the immigration system's performance, briefing papers, governance documents, and guidance and training materials for staff;
 - observed "walk-throughs" of application forms and the decision-making process by Immigration New Zealand staff; and
 - conducted 34 interviews with individuals and groups, including staff who process applications for skilled residence visas and those working on and managing policy and operations. We also heard from people who are licensed to advise applicants.

How the skilled residence visa system works

- 2.1 In this Part, we discuss:
- Immigration New Zealand’s regulatory and operational context; and
 - how the skilled residence visa system has changed recently.

Legislation sets out how immigration in New Zealand is governed

- 2.2 Two pieces of legislation govern immigration in New Zealand – the Immigration Act 2009 and the Immigration Advisers Licensing Act 2007. Immigration New Zealand refers to the Immigration Act as the “fundamental source of New Zealand immigration law”.
- 2.3 Three main classes of visa can be granted under the Immigration Act. These are **residence** class visas for indefinite stay in New Zealand; **temporary** entry class visas for a specified event, time, or purpose; and **transit** visas for passing through New Zealand on the way to another country.
- 2.4 The Immigration Act requires the Minister of Immigration to approve and certify immigration instructions. These set out the rules and criteria that people must meet to be granted a visa, the evidence people must provide to show that they meet those criteria, and the process Immigration New Zealand follows to assess and verify visa applications. They are published in the *Immigration New Zealand operational manual* and on Immigration New Zealand’s website.
- 2.5 MBIE says that, in practice:
- ...[t]he complexity and breadth of the portfolio and its interrelation with other areas of government, means that Ministers of Immigration generally seek Cabinet’s agreement to broad policy decisions, with more minor and technical decisions typically made without Cabinet’s involvement.⁷*
- 2.6 Regulations made under the Immigration Act set out the legal requirements for other administrative matters, such as fees and levies.
- 2.7 Under the Immigration Act, the Minister of Immigration is the primary decision-maker on visa applications. In practice, the Minister delegates most of their decision-making powers to Immigration New Zealand officials, including Immigration Officers who are warranted to make visa decisions.

⁷ Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2023), *Briefing for the Incoming Minister of Immigration*, page 19, paragraph 81, at mbie.govt.nz.

Immigration New Zealand administers most of the powers and functions relating to immigration

- 2.8 Immigration New Zealand administers the core operational functions of New Zealand's immigration system.
- 2.9 As a whole, the immigration system is responsible for:
- providing immigration services, including managing and processing visa applications;
 - managing the movement of people who are not New Zealand citizens across the border;
 - attracting and supporting migrants; and
 - enforcing compliance and managing other immigration and security risks, including through international partnerships.
- 2.10 Immigration New Zealand describes its purpose as being “a trusted steward of the immigration system by ensuring the balance is right between facilitating the migration New Zealand needs and managing risk”.⁸
- 2.11 Immigration New Zealand is led by the Deputy Secretary Immigration, who is part of MBIE's Senior Leadership Team. Together with the Office of the Deputy Secretary, eight operational branches manage the day-to-day work of Immigration New Zealand. The leaders of those branches form the Immigration Leadership Team.
- 2.12 As at 30 September 2024, nearly 2247 full-time equivalent New Zealand-based staff were working at Immigration New Zealand. This represented nearly 38% of MBIE's total workforce.
- 2.13 In early April 2024, 123 full-time equivalent staff were directly involved in processing applications for skilled residence visas at Immigration New Zealand's Manukau office, which is the primary site for processing applications for skilled residence visas.
- 2.14 Since the border reopened after the Covid-19 pandemic in July 2022, Immigration New Zealand has faced staffing challenges. In 2021/22, 40% of Immigration New Zealand's workforce had been in their current job for less than a year and 21% of its workforce had been in their current job for less than three months.⁹ Therefore, many of its staff were relatively inexperienced.

⁸ Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2023), *Briefing for the Incoming Minister of Immigration*, page 21, paragraph 93, at mbie.govt.nz.

⁹ Education and Workforce Committee (2023), *Briefing on the 2021/22 performance and current operations of Immigration New Zealand*, page 8, at selectcommittees.parliament.nz.

The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment’s Promise, Te Kī Taurangi, sets out what customers can expect of its services

- 2.15 MBIE’s Promise, Te Kī Taurangi, outlines what people can expect when they interact with MBIE.¹⁰ It promises interactions that are:
- Simple – Māmā: We listen to you and keep it simple;
 - Safe – Haumarū: We help keep people safe through consistent application of the law; and
 - Certain – Mārama: We help you to know what you need to do, how to do it, and why.
- 2.16 Some of the ways that MBIE says it will meet these commitments include:
- avoiding complication;
 - using plain language;
 - making sure people know their rights and responsibilities;
 - explaining where people are in the process;
 - being clear about how decisions are made; and
 - providing accurate, relevant, and clear information.¹¹
- 2.17 In this report we use the principles of the MBIE Promise to help us to consider how well the skilled residence visa system is working for applicants.

The skilled residence visa system has undergone significant change

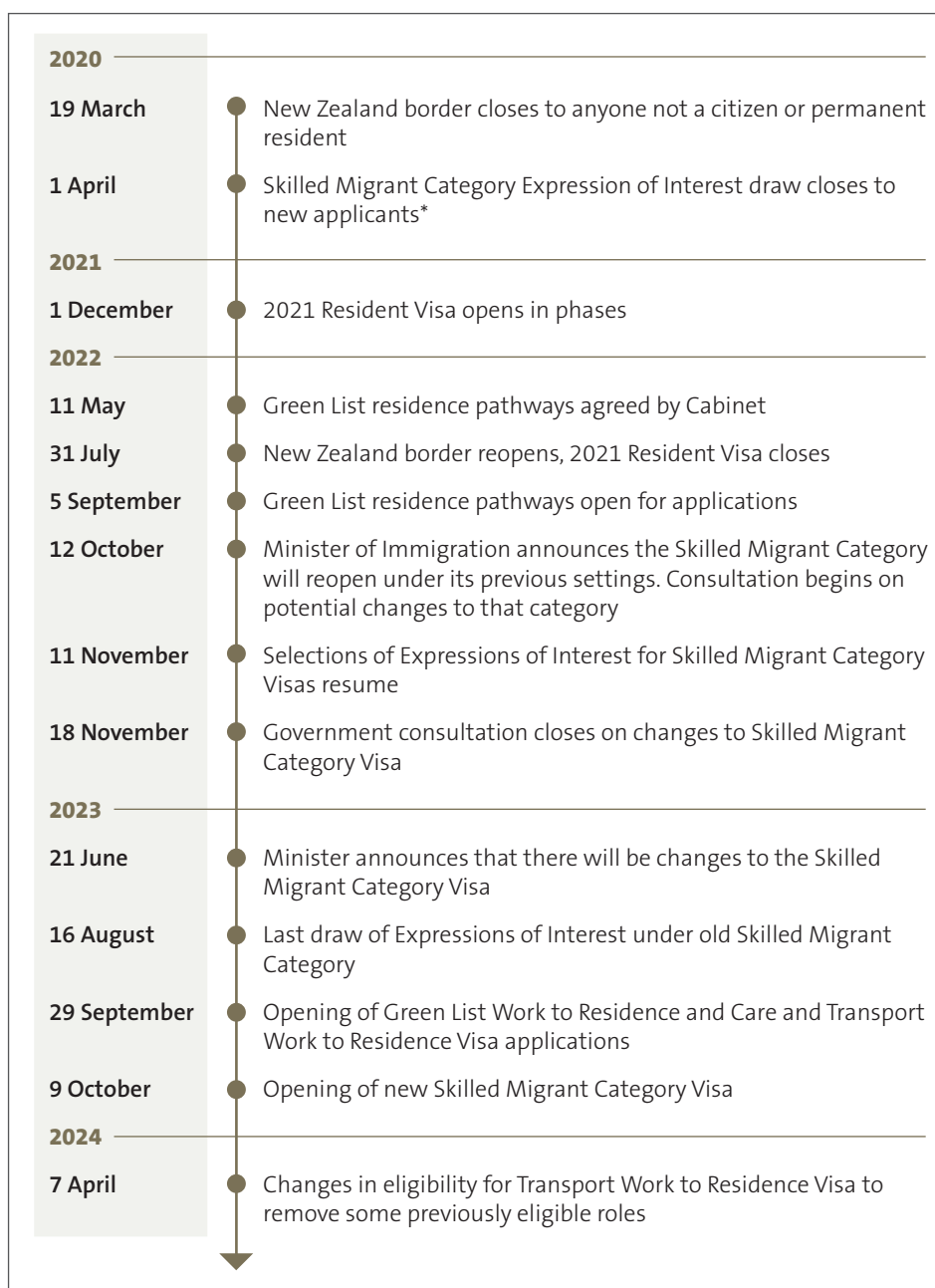
- 2.18 In March 2020, the Government closed the border in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Immigration New Zealand describes this and its flow-on effects, including the closure of overseas visa branches, as a period of “unprecedented challenges for the immigration system”.¹² This period of considerable policy change was accompanied by staffing challenges (see paragraph 2.14).
- 2.19 Figure 1 summarises the main changes to the skilled residence visa system since the border closed.

¹⁰ “Our promise Te Kī Taurangi” at mbie.govt.nz.

¹¹ “Our promise Te Kī Taurangi” at mbie.govt.nz.

¹² Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2023), *Briefing for the Incoming Minister of Immigration*, page 10, paragraph 30, at mbie.govt.nz.

Figure 1
Timeline of changes to skilled residence visas since 2020



* This was the process by which applicants with the highest number of points were invited to apply for residence (see paragraphs 2.29-2.30).

The 2021 Resident Visa acknowledged the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on migrants

- 2.20 In 2020/21, the border closure affected the lives and plans of many migrants. To acknowledge that disruption and to support business recovery, the Government introduced a one-off 2021 Resident Visa pathway in December 2021.
- 2.21 The 2021 Resident Visa was for people who had been in the country on 29 September 2021 either on an eligible visa or whose application for an eligible visa had later been granted. They also had to meet one of three criteria, which Immigration New Zealand often referred to by the shorthand “settled”, “skilled”, or “scarce”.
- 2.22 These criteria were that the applicant:
- had lived in New Zealand for three years before 29 September 2021;
 - was earning at or above the median wage; and
 - was working in a role on a scarce list.¹³
- 2.23 Applications for the 2021 Resident Visa closed in July 2022. By June 2024, Immigration New Zealand had approved 212,635 people for residency and issued them with visas under this scheme.¹⁴

The Green List prioritises applications from migrants with skills in demand

- 2.24 Shortly after the border fully reopened in mid-2022, the Government introduced a “Green List” of roles in demand in New Zealand. The list prioritises residence for highly skilled migrants in specified hard-to-fill occupations such as health and information technology.
- 2.25 The list has two tiers. Tier 1 is a straight-to-residence pathway with no requirement for previous work experience in New Zealand. Tier 2 establishes a pathway to residence after two years of work experience. There are also specific pathways to residence for those in the care and transport sectors.
- 2.26 Cabinet approves changes to this list on the recommendation of the Minister of Immigration.
- 2.27 These changes can be rapid and significant for applicants. For example, a Cabinet decision in March 2024 added six roles to the Green List, with effect from April

¹³ Four 2021 Resident Visa scarce lists included jobs in areas of long-term skills shortages; personal carers and other critical health workers; certain primary sector roles; and occupations requiring occupational registration in the health or education sectors.

¹⁴ Immigration New Zealand has processed 99% of 2021 Resident Visa applications. Immigration New Zealand says this figure is correct to 15 June 2024, which is the last time that Immigration New Zealand will update these numbers. See “2021 Resident Visa processing updates” at immigration.govt.nz.

2024. The same decision paused plans made in August 2023 to add a further 11 roles to the List.¹⁵ Secondary school teachers were moved from Tier 2 to Tier 1, with effect from 1 May 2024.

The new Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa has a simplified points system

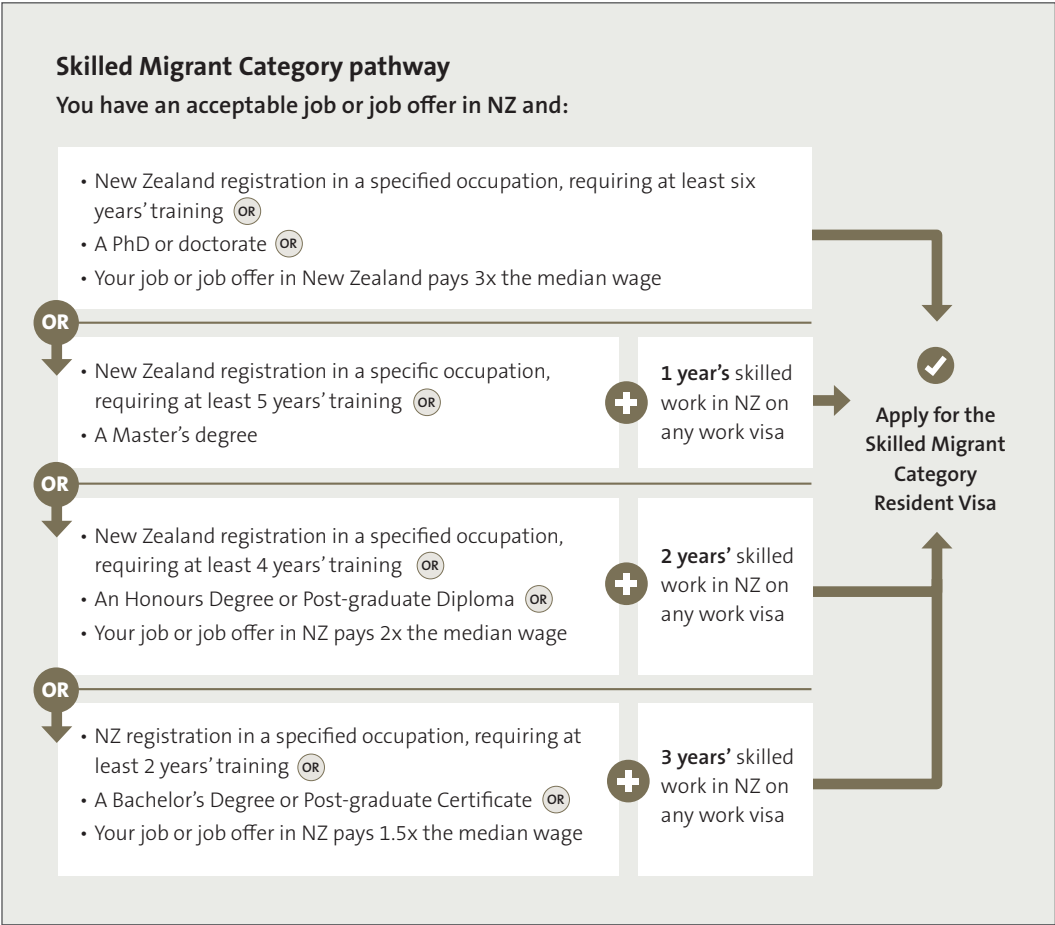
- 2.28 A new version of the Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa was opened for applications from 9 October 2023.
- 2.29 The old system had two stages. The first required applicants to submit an Expression of Interest and enter a pool of applicants. Each applicant would be assigned points that were determined by several factors.
- 2.30 In the second stage, candidates with the highest number of points would be periodically drawn from this pool and invited to apply for residence.¹⁶ The numbers that could be drawn were determined by a planning range (sometimes referred to as a cap) set by the Government, which limited the number of people who could be granted residence annually.¹⁷
- 2.31 The new scheme simplifies the points system, streamlines the Expression of Interest process, and removes the pool and the cap. Applicants now need a total of six points from one of three categories: occupational registration, qualification, or income. An applicant can also claim one point for each year of skilled work in New Zealand, to a maximum of three points.
- 2.32 Applicants also need to have an offer of employment by an accredited employer before they can apply. Most applications in recent years have come from people who are already in New Zealand.
- 2.33 Figure 2 summarises the current skilled residence application pathways.

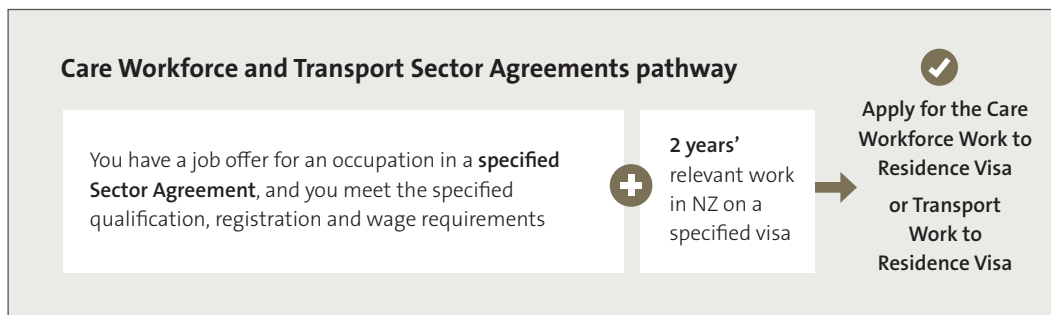
¹⁵ Five roles were added to Tier 1 of the Green List and one role added to Tier 2. The five roles added to Tier 1 were aviation engineer (avionics, aeronautical, aerospace engineer), naval architect (also known as marine designer), ICT database and systems administrator, mechanical engineering technician, and aircraft maintenance engineer. Corrections officer was added to Tier 2. The previously announced roles that were not added were paving plant operator, metal fabricator, pressure welder, welder, fitter (general), fitter and turner, fitter-welder, metal machinist (first class), panel beater, vehicle painter, and road roller operator.

¹⁶ Applicants were assigned points for skills and other non-skill factors, including intended location in New Zealand (choosing to live outside Auckland gave more points) and study in New Zealand. From November 2022 to when the scheme closed in August 2023, applicants needed 180 points to be eligible to be drawn from the pool. See the *Future of the Skilled Migrant Category* consultation document, page 14, at mbie.govt.nz.

¹⁷ In 2018/19, the planning range was set at 50,000-60,000 visas. Skilled and business migrants were allocated 60% of these places.

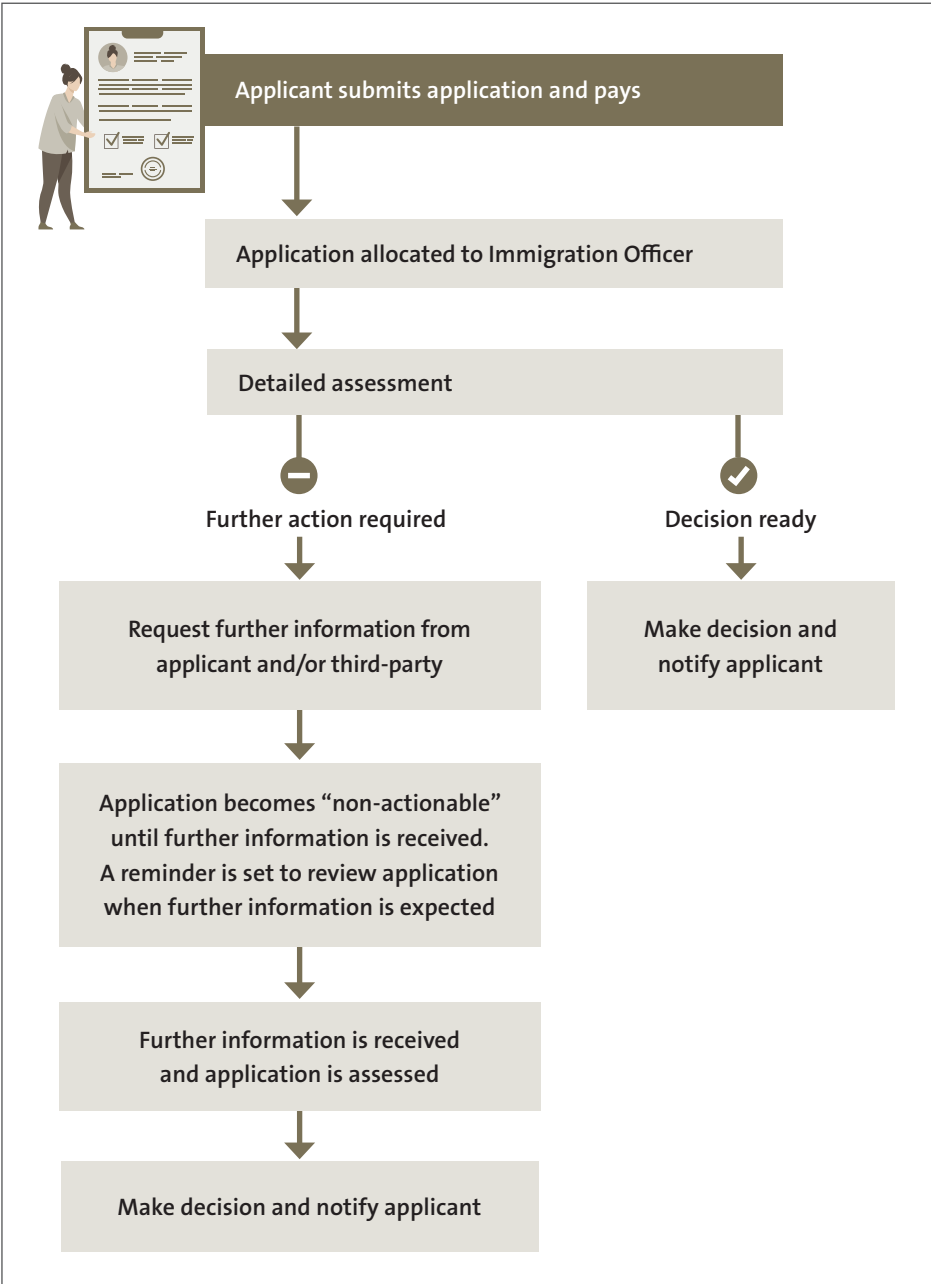
Figure 2
Pathways to skilled residence





2.34 Immigration New Zealand processes each of these types of skilled residence visa in broadly the same way. Figure 3 sets out the main steps that an application for a skilled residence visa goes through before Immigration New Zealand decides whether to grant it.

Figure 3
Application process for skilled residence visa



3

Stronger focus is needed on the experiences of skilled residence visa applicants

- 3.1 In this Part, we discuss the work Immigration New Zealand is doing to improve applicants' experience of skilled residence visa processing. It includes how Immigration New Zealand manages the speed of visa processing and the quality of the information it provides to help applicants as they go through the process of applying for visas.
- 3.2 We expected the skilled residence visa system to be effective for applicants. This means that we expected that Immigration New Zealand's processing of applications would be:
- timely – things happen at the right time, with no unnecessary delays;
 - clear – it is easy for applicants to find out how their application is progressing and to understand what they need to do to help it progress;
 - smooth – Immigration New Zealand has set up its information and information technology (IT) systems to make it as easy as possible for applicants to understand what they need to do as they go through the application process, including as they move between different visa types that lead to residence; and
 - fair and consistent – there is a clear framework for managing the quality of decision-making about applications.
- 3.3 Our expectations align with aspects of MBIE's Promise (see paragraph 2.15), particularly that interactions with it will be:
- Simple – Māmā: We listen to you and keep it simple; and
 - Certain – Mārama: We help you to know what you need to do, how to do it, and why.

Summary of findings

- 3.4 Immigration New Zealand understands the importance of improving applicants' experience as they move through the application process.
- 3.5 Immigration New Zealand is working to improve the experience of applicants for all visa types. It has used customer feedback to identify priorities for action. These priorities are broadly consistent with what we heard from people about the need to improve:
- communications;
 - access to information about the progress of applications; and
 - processing times.
- 3.6 However, work to improve the experience of applicants lacks a focus on skilled residence visa applicants as a specific group with specific needs. In our view,

there is scope for Immigration New Zealand to carry out more targeted work with this applicant group. Where this work has been done, staff have valued the insights it gave them.

- 3.7 New Zealand scores well on an international tool for measuring its attractiveness to migrants, which includes an assessment of speed of visa processing. In recent years, how long applicants wait for Immigration New Zealand to make a decision about their visa has been a significant issue, so minimising delays has been and remains an operational priority.¹⁸
- 3.8 It is important that Immigration New Zealand continues to manage this closely. It is also important for Immigration New Zealand to consider how effectively the system is working in other ways, because speed of processing is not the only factor that helps the system to work well for applicants. Systems that are easy to understand and use also play an important part in a country's ability to attract highly skilled migrants.
- 3.9 We saw several opportunities for Immigration New Zealand to improve the clarity and smoothness of the process of applying for skilled residence visas. These include providing better communication, more information about the progress of applications, and support to help applicants provide the right documents at the right time. It is also important that Immigration New Zealand consider where it could streamline its systems and processes to make the application process as simple as possible for skilled residence visa applicants, who often move to this type of visa from other visa types.
- 3.10 Immigration New Zealand could also better use feedback from frontline staff to improve how the skilled residence visa system works.

Immigration New Zealand is working to improve applicants' experience

A Customer Branch promotes applicant-focused work at Immigration New Zealand

- 3.11 Immigration New Zealand is working to better meet the needs of its applicants and to better use its information to improve its services.
- 3.12 In 2023, Immigration New Zealand proposed changes to its organisational structure and ways of working, including placing greater emphasis on customer service.

¹⁸ For example, in 2019, Immigration New Zealand processed and approved only about 40% of all eligible applications for a Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa. See the *Future of the Skilled Migrant Category* consultation document, page 11, at mbie.govt.nz.

- 3.13 Since 2023, Immigration New Zealand’s stakeholder engagement, customer experience, and customer communication staff work together in a Customer Branch. A key focus of this branch is to promote applicant-focused work, including work on service design, improving written communication, and improving the quality of information on Immigration New Zealand’s website.
- 3.14 This work aligns with aspects of MBIE’s Promise, particularly under Certain – Mārama. These include “explaining where people are in the process” and “providing accurate, relevant and clear information” (see paragraph 2.16).
- 3.15 The Service Design and Implementation Branch works alongside the Office of the Chief Operating Officer and the Customer Branch to manage operational change. When we carried out our audit, the Service Design and Implementation Branch was looking to introduce a continuous improvement framework to improve communication with applicants. We understand that the framework has now been created and is being rolled out for use across Immigration New Zealand.
- 3.16 Immigration New Zealand knows that its letters can be hard to understand. It is working to improve its written communications, which includes considering a correspondence guide to help Immigration Officers with their communication.
- 3.17 We were told that other parts of MBIE (such as the Tenancy Tribunal) use plain language to communicate complex information.¹⁹ In our view, there is an opportunity for Immigration New Zealand to see whether a stronger focus on plain language could help it improve its written communications.
- 3.18 Working directly with applicants has also provided Immigration New Zealand with valuable insights. For example, when it consulted applicants about how it explains application processing times, Immigration New Zealand learned that applicants tend not to click on the hyperlinks in letters to take them to further information.
- 3.19 Immigration New Zealand is now looking at how it could customise the letters to include important information in the text of the letter.
- 3.20 Immigration New Zealand has received feedback that its website can be difficult for applicants to use. We understand that, in response to this feedback, MBIE has recently agreed to design and deliver a new website for immigration. MBIE expects this to be in place by the end of 2024.

¹⁹ Plain language is defined as clear, concise, well-organised and appropriate to the intended audience. See section 5 of the Plain Language Act 2022.

Staff want more opportunities to work directly with applicants

- 3.21 During the design of the new Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa, Immigration New Zealand's Service Design and Implementation and Customer Branches worked together to consult a small applicant reference group. They tested the online application form for the new visa with this group before it was launched.
- 3.22 Staff told us that, when the system went live, they could see how this work benefited applicants. They also told us that they wished they had more time to do this type of work.
- 3.23 In our view, Immigration New Zealand needs to keep building on the applicant-focused work it has in progress. We consider that it now needs to:
- convert its increasing knowledge, on matters such as the information applicants want, into agreed plans for action;
 - allocate enough staff time to the projects so that they can progress in a timely way; and
 - appropriately target the design of improvements at the specific needs of applicants for different types of visa, including applicants for skilled residence visas.

Processing applications quickly is important to visa applicants and to Immigration New Zealand

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development measures countries' relative attractiveness to migrants and includes timeliness of visa processing in its scoring system

- 3.24 The importance of processing applications from skilled migrants quickly is recognised internationally. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provides an online tool that considers the strengths and weaknesses of OECD countries in attracting and retaining different types of talented migrants.²⁰ This tool is called the "Indicators of talent attractiveness" and results from it have been published twice, in 2019 and 2023.

²⁰ Workers with master and doctoral degrees, entrepreneurs, university students, and for 2023, start-up founders.

- 3.25 The OECD assesses attractiveness by scoring a country against seven or eight dimensions.²¹ It then applies penalties to the score that relate to visa and admission policy, including how long it takes to process applications for visas.²²
- 3.26 The OECD does not publish the percentage penalty it applies to each country's score, but it does show the effect of the penalty on attractiveness scores.²³ In 2023, New Zealand ranked first for its attractiveness to workers with master/doctoral degrees, after any penalties were applied.
- 3.27 The OECD survey is a reminder that there are several factors that make a country an attractive destination for migrants, and that the systems used to make decisions about visas are also important for attracting highly skilled migrants. If New Zealand is to remain competitive in the global skills market, it is important for Immigration New Zealand to manage how quickly visas are processed. However, as we note in paragraph 3.2, a system that works well for applicants is also clear, smooth, fair, and consistent; an effective system will make sure all these factors are managed well.

Applicants for skilled residence visas value high-quality information about how long applications take to process

- 3.28 When an applicant considers making New Zealand their permanent home by applying for a skilled residence visa, this has significant consequences for their future. A timely process, where decisions are made at the most useful time for applicants, allows people to make plans to move themselves and their families and reduces uncertainty. It also meets the MBIE promise to “keep it simple”, which MBIE explains means “valuing your time”.
- 3.29 Immigration New Zealand's work with applicants found that, when applicants look for information, one of their most important considerations was high-quality information about how long an application for a visa takes to process.

21 The dimensions are quality of opportunity, income and tax, future prospects, family environment, skills environment, inclusiveness, quality of life, and health (users of the online tool can decide whether to include the health dimension).

22 The OECD survey says that it uses temporary visa programmes for its assessment. See Tuccio, M (2019), *Measuring and assessing talent attractiveness in OECD countries*, page 20 and Table A.2, at oecd-ilibrary.org. However, the programme used for New Zealand in the category of workers is the Skilled Migrant Category, which is a “residence” not a “temporary” visa.

23 The policy dimension uses restricted-access proprietary data from Fragomen, an international law firm specialising in immigration law. See Tuccio, M (2019), *Measuring and assessing talent attractiveness in OECD countries*, at oecd-ilibrary.org.

Immigration New Zealand allocates applications to Immigration Officers with the aim to avoid queues

- 3.30 Immigration New Zealand has a strong focus on processing applications for visas quickly. Under the old Skilled Migrant Category visa, for which the last Expressions of Interest were drawn on 16 August 2023 (see Figure 1), queues of people waited for their applications to be drawn and allocated to an Immigration Officer.²⁴ This queue occurred when Immigration New Zealand was required to operate within a planning range (a cap – see paragraph 2.30).
- 3.31 Under the new system, there is no limit on the numbers of people who can be approved for residence and Immigration New Zealand looks to avoid queues. Managers monitor the flow of applications and seek to allocate work so that applications are “in flow” rather than in a queue. Immigration New Zealand says that being in flow means that applications are quickly allocated to an Immigration Officer to process (within 48 hours of receiving them).
- 3.32 When we visited Immigration New Zealand in February 2024, we heard that the skilled residence visa system was broadly in flow. However, we also saw that this can change quickly.
- 3.33 Immigration New Zealand told us in early June 2024 that it had allocated staff away from processing applications for skilled residence visas to other priority work. This meant that it was no longer meeting its 48-hour allocation goal.
- 3.34 Success measures for staff and for the management of the system focus on processing speed. Staff measures for “being productive” include decision rates each day for types of skilled residence visas.
- 3.35 Senior managers also use red-amber-green dashboards of metrics to monitor application processing. These measure the percentage and number of unallocated applications (a way of checking whether a queue is forming) and the oldest unallocated applications (in days elapsed, to check waiting times).
- 3.36 Contingency plans set out actions that Immigration New Zealand can take to manage how long it takes to process applications if the metrics indicate that a problem is emerging. These actions include:
- updating public communications;
 - changing workforce allocation to target processing staff to a particular visa type; or
 - amending immigration instructions (the processing rules) to prioritise processing certain visa types over others.

²⁴ For example, in 2019, Immigration New Zealand processed and approved only about 40% of all eligible applications for a Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa. See the *Future of the Skilled Migrant Category* consultation document, page 11, at mbie.govt.nz.

Managing incomplete applications is challenging

- 3.37 Incomplete applications do not include all the necessary information that an Immigration Officer needs to decide whether to grant a visa. The Immigration Officer needs to go back to the applicant for more information, which takes time.
- 3.38 Submitting an incomplete application and the resulting delays in getting a decision about their visa can be frustrating for applicants. Incomplete applications also adversely affect Immigration New Zealand's performance measures.
- 3.39 In November 2023, Immigration New Zealand analysed a small sample of Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa applications and found that 81% were incomplete. In the same period, it found that about 65% of Green List Tier 1 Straight to Residence Visa applications were incomplete. Common problems included a lack of overseas police certificates (as evidence of good character) and not enough evidence of qualifications.
- 3.40 Some staff we talked to felt that supplying incomplete information might be influenced by an applicant's misconception that they would be joining a queue and would have time to get the documentation they needed while they waited. We also heard that applicants might not understand what Immigration New Zealand requires.
- 3.41 Immigration New Zealand made several improvements in response to these findings. It modified the online application form for the Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa and raised the issues with licensed immigration advisers so they could provide better guidance to applicants. It also revised the information it supplied to staff working in the immigration contact centre and updated its website.
- 3.42 After these changes were made, the percentage of incomplete applications in the Skilled Migrant Category reduced to 53% by January 2024. However, the percentage of incomplete applications for Green List Tier 1 Straight to Residence Visas rose to 75% in the same period.
- 3.43 Staff explained that the IT system that supports applications for Straight to Residence Visas makes it harder and more expensive to modify the application form for this visa than the platform used for Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visas. This might be a reason why the completeness of Straight to Residence applications did not improve.
- 3.44 In a system that has a strong focus on throughput and speed, incomplete applications are a barrier to processing efficiency.

- 3.45 Applicants are given a small number of opportunities to supply the right documents before Immigration New Zealand declines the application. If an application is declined, the applicant must decide whether to restart the process – and pay again.
- 3.46 This emphasis on processing efficiency assists with time management, but, in our view, it is not necessarily the best outcome for an applicant who has made a mistake or misunderstood what information Immigration New Zealand requires. It is also not necessarily a good outcome for the country if the applicant's skills are lost because they decide to go elsewhere.
- 3.47 Getting this balance right is critical. Focusing on how to make the visa application process work better for the applicant could give staff time and discretion to explore alternatives. This could include allowing applicants the choice to pause their applications to gather the right information.

Better guidance would help applicants make complete applications

- 3.48 Immigration New Zealand's staff cannot give advice to individuals about their applications.²⁵ Only a licensed immigration adviser (or a specified person who is exempt from licensing) can legally give this advice.²⁶
- 3.49 Immigration New Zealand explains that information becomes immigration advice if it is tailored to an individual's particular circumstances. This means that it is important for Immigration New Zealand to have good ways of translating what its frontline staff see and learn into general information that helps applicants to prepare their applications.
- 3.50 Doing this well can help all applicants understand what information they need to provide, not just those who have access to immigration advice. Information from its frontline staff is a valuable resource for this work.
- 3.51 We encourage Immigration New Zealand to consider what additional guidance it can offer to applicants in these and other instances where it becomes aware of trends in incomplete information.

There is a need for guidance with a specific focus on skilled residence visas

- 3.52 As part of its Customer Satisfaction Improvement Plan, Immigration New Zealand is working to make it easier for applicants to provide the information it requires for all visa types at the earliest opportunity.

²⁵ See section 15 of the Immigration Advisers Licensing Act 2007.

²⁶ Section 11 of the Immigration Advisers Licensing Act 2007 sets out the groups of people exempt from the requirement to be licensed to give immigration advice. This includes people giving advice in an informal or family context, members of Parliament, and lawyers and employers or volunteers for citizens advice bureaux.

- 3.53 However, this work does not include a specific focus on skilled residence visas. In our view, this work should specifically consider visa type, so Immigration New Zealand can consider the particular issues that applicants for skilled residence visas face.
- 3.54 For example, in early 2024, not long after the new Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa was introduced, Immigration New Zealand staff told us that applicants were struggling to understand what information they needed to claim points for a PhD.
- 3.55 Applicants sometimes sent a letter from a university that showed that they were eligible to graduate with a PhD. However, because Immigration New Zealand required a degree certificate, it declined these applications. After it has declined an application, migrants need to pay a new fee for a new application.
- 3.56 In August 2024, immigration instructions were changed to allow applicants to submit a letter of their eligibility to graduate with a PhD rather than the certificate.²⁷
- 3.57 However, it took some time for Immigration New Zealand to make this change. We encourage Immigration New Zealand to act as soon as practicable when it becomes aware of issues such as this to save time and costs for applicants and staff.

Applicants need greater clarity about the progress of applications

Applicants want to know how their applications are progressing

- 3.58 For applicants, the time it takes to receive a decision about their application is a key concern. It is also an important performance measure for Immigration New Zealand.
- 3.59 Making it easy for applicants to see how their application is progressing improves the transparency of the process, reduces applicants' anxiety, and saves them spending time on phone calls and emails to understand their application's progress.
- 3.60 Staff working in applicant-facing services told us that one of the main reasons that applicants call them is to seek updates about the status of their applications. We were told that the questions most often asked by callers were about the progress of their applications and questions about what documents to provide to support applications under the new Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa.

Immigration New Zealand has changed the ways it provides information about timeliness

- 3.61 Immigration New Zealand has taken steps to improve the general information it provides about how long it takes to process visa applications. In late 2023, Immigration New Zealand worked with applicants on a project to improve how it reports information on its website about application processing times. This included information about processing times for the new Skilled Migrant Category, Straight to Residence, and Work to Residence Visas.
- 3.62 Before the consultation, Immigration New Zealand expressed the measure of processing time as a median number of weekdays. It also gave the time it takes to process 90% of applications, which it also expressed in weekdays. It defined weekdays as Monday to Friday unless one of these was a public holiday. Feedback showed that applicants found the two measures confusing.
- 3.63 In response to the consultation, Immigration New Zealand included more information about what factors can delay processing and published a single measure – the time it takes to process 80% of all visas of a particular type, based on applications in a given month, which it expressed in months or weeks rather than weekdays.²⁸ Although having one measure is simpler, we encourage Immigration New Zealand to continue to seek feedback on the usefulness of this measure.

Technology improvements would help applicants understand how their applications are progressing

- 3.64 In a competitive global market for skilled migrants, an overly cumbersome or confusing experience of applying for a skilled residence visa could negatively affect an applicant's impression of New Zealand. Therefore, it is important that applicants can easily access information about the progress of their application when they want to.
- 3.65 People are accustomed to receiving real-time information on their phones about the status of, for example, food they have ordered or deliveries they are expecting. They are likely to expect a similar experience from government organisations.
- 3.66 However, when an applicant for a skilled residence visa logs in to Immigration New Zealand's website to track the status of their application, they can access only limited information about their application's progress.

²⁸ After we completed our fieldwork, Immigration New Zealand made further changes to how it expresses wait times. For applications decided in September 2024, the Immigration New Zealand website showed the time taken to process "most" visas of a type rather than 80%.

- 3.67 In our view, Immigration New Zealand needs to prioritise work to improve the accessibility of information about the status of applications for skilled residence visas. This will better align with MBIE’s Promise about certainty, particularly “explaining where people are in the process” and “providing accurate, relevant and clear information”.
- 3.68 The Advanced Digital Employer-led Processing and Targeting (ADEPT) system is an online IT system that Immigration New Zealand uses for some other types of visas, such as the Accredited Employer Work Visa. Applicants use the system to apply for these visas, and Immigration Officers use it to process those applications.
- 3.69 ADEPT allows applicants to easily see information about the status of their application, including whether their application is awaiting specific information, such as health or security checks.
- 3.70 Immigration New Zealand is planning to move more visa categories onto the ADEPT system. However, a recent independent review into the Accredited Employer Work Visa highlighted considerable challenges with ADEPT’s implementation.²⁹ When we wrote this report, Immigration New Zealand did not have a time frame for moving skilled residence visas to ADEPT.

Immigration New Zealand needs to consider streamlining the systems it uses for different visas

- 3.71 For many skilled migrants, the “pathway to residence” involves moving between different types of visas. Having different IT systems for different types of visas affects the experience of applying for a visa. It also creates processing inefficiencies for staff.
- 3.72 When an applicant makes more than one application, Immigration New Zealand cannot easily use information from previous applications for the subsequent one. Staff also have to work with different IT systems to find the information they need when they are making decisions. This takes additional processing time.
- 3.73 For example, when a member of staff wants to check the accreditation of an employer as part of assessing a visa application, they must check information held in ADEPT and on another system, the Applicant Management System.

²⁹ Bestwick, J (2024), *Assurance review of the operation of the Accredited Employer Work Visa scheme*, at publicservice.govt.nz.

- 3.74 Staff told us that they have access to useful tools and training to help them with their work (see paragraph 4.44). For processing staff, these include assessment templates, standard operating practice documents, and databases of information to help them check different parts of the application, such as qualifications or the health assessment.
- 3.75 However, we saw that staff have to switch in and out of different IT systems to carry out all the required checks on a single application because the different systems do not always share information. This adds time and complexity to the decision-making process.
- 3.76 In our view, Immigration New Zealand could do more to streamline its decision-making tools and help staff to more effectively navigate decision-making resources.

Recommendation 1

We recommend that the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment prioritise work to enable applicants for skilled residence visas to easily track application progress and to enable the smooth transfer of applicants between different types of visas.

Immigration New Zealand should enhance monitoring and reporting to focus on skilled residence visas

- 3.77 Immigration New Zealand is currently carrying out several projects that focus on improving the experience of applicants for visas. However, these projects concentrate on general improvements to Immigration New Zealand's systems.
- 3.78 The projects target applicants for many types of visa. They are not specific enough to provide insights into the needs of particular groups of applicants, such as applicants for skilled residence visas.
- 3.79 Some of Immigration New Zealand's key tools for capturing applicant sentiment, such as its Customer Satisfaction Survey and its complaints and call centre information, do not specifically record data about specific types of skilled residence visas.

3.80 Figure 4 shows how Immigration New Zealand reports information about the performance of the skilled residence visa system.

Figure 4
How Immigration New Zealand reports information about the performance of the skilled residence visa system

Information reported	Broken down by immigration office site	Broken down by general type as "residence visa"	Broken down by specific type of residence visa
Complaints	✓		
Number of visas processed each week	✓		✓
Contingency planning*			✓
Visa decision quality ratings (quarterly)	✓	✓	✓
Online processing times			✓
Customer satisfaction survey results		✓	
Call centre waiting times		✓	
Visa approvals (in the annual report)		✓	
Occupations of applicants		✓	
Database (Migration Data Explorer)**		✓	✓

* This refers to reporting against a set of performance measures about how quickly visas are being processed to assess whether any contingency plans need to be activated.

** This is an online tool that provides the public with information about current and historical skilled residence visa numbers, migrant outcomes, and the nationality and occupations of people receiving residence.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment include a specific focus on skilled residence visas in all aspects of its monitoring of, and reporting on, the visa system.

Immigration New Zealand should improve how it collects and reports information about complaints

- 3.81 The Central Feedback Team at Immigration New Zealand reports on complaints each month. This provides some insights to help Immigration New Zealand identify where to improve. However, the reporting breaks information about complaints down by the location of the relevant office and not by visa type.
- 3.82 We were told that not many complaints are made about skilled residence visas. However, it was not possible for us to verify this through the monthly reporting.
- 3.83 Complaints data can indicate how well a system is working but, in our view, it does not follow that a low number of complaints means that the system is working well. For example, applicants might not wish to complain if they worry that doing so might hinder their chances of obtaining a visa.
- 3.84 There might be other factors affecting the number of complaints. For example, when we carried out our audit, we were told that Immigration New Zealand wanted all complaints to be made in writing. If someone called the immigration contact centre to raise an issue, they would be asked to follow up in writing for it to be categorised as a complaint.
- 3.85 MBIE has subsequently said that the Immigration New Zealand website makes provision for people who cannot use an online or paper form. A person wishing to make a complaint can phone the Customer Service Centre and make a verbal complaint to a staff member, who will submit it on their behalf.
- 3.86 This is positive. We encourage Immigration New Zealand to consider whether it could do more to help people who might find it difficult to complain in writing or verbally, including people with a first language other than English.
- 3.87 We consider that, because people might be unwilling to put their visa in jeopardy by complaining, and because Immigration New Zealand does not specifically collect data about complaints from skilled residence visa applicants, it needs to use caution when interpreting who and what its complaints information represents. Ideally, complaints data is one part of a wider system to gather feedback from applicants.
- 3.88 Staff noted that some applicant groups seem under-represented in the complaints process. In our view, Immigration New Zealand should follow up on these observations.

Immigration New Zealand needs to get feedback from a wider range of stakeholders

- 3.89 It is important for Immigration New Zealand to get a wide range of feedback from stakeholders with experience of, and interests in, the skilled residence visa system, including applicants, staff, advisers, and employers.
- 3.90 Immigration New Zealand uses a group of licensed immigration advisers and lawyers to provide advice and guidance from the perspective of practitioners and their clients. Licensed immigration advisers are authorised to give immigration advice and charge fees for their services.
- 3.91 However, it is harder for Immigration New Zealand to get the perspective of skilled residence visa applicants who do not use immigration advisers.³⁰ Those who choose not to use professional services might have different communication and information needs than those who do.

Immigration New Zealand needs to work more closely with applicants and employers when it recommends changes to immigration instructions

- 3.92 Immigration New Zealand does not routinely consult applicants for skilled residence visas when it develops operational policy.
- 3.93 We heard that a lack of consultation and a change to immigration instructions, made at short notice before the new Skilled Migrant Category visa opened, caused problems for visa applicants and their employers in the tertiary education sector in 2023.
- 3.94 The change was to the list of qualifications exempt from the requirement to have a formal recognition assessment during the visa application process.³¹ This affected applicants from countries that New Zealand universities were accustomed to recruiting from.
- 3.95 Immigration New Zealand announced the changes to the list on its website on 19 September 2023 and by official Amendment Circular on 21 September, before the new Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa opened on 9 October. The changes were significant and they took effect from 29 September, only 10 days after the first announcement.

30 For 2023/24, Immigration New Zealand told us that advisers were used for about 26% of skilled residence applications, and lawyers for an additional 6%.

31 Applicants seeking a visa under the Skilled Migrant Category may be required to have an International Qualifications Recognition Statement from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to proceed. A recognition statement is not required for qualifications exempt from assessment.

- 3.96 The updated list reduced the number of countries and territories whose qualifications are exempt from assessment from 35 to seven.³² It also removed the exemption for specified qualifications from institutions in those seven countries and territories.
- 3.97 We were told that potential applicants were “incredulous” that New Zealand did not recognise their degrees and that they faced more cost and longer waiting times because they now needed to apply for recognition. The list was changed again in March 2024 to add exemptions for qualifications from five further countries.³³
- 3.98 Immigration New Zealand does not control which qualifications are exempt from assessment, but it has agreements with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to provide assessment services. It has also made commitments under MBIE’s Promise to “help you to know what you need to do, how to do it, and why”.
- 3.99 In this instance, it would have been more consistent with MBIE’s Promise for Immigration New Zealand to consult with stakeholders and to give more notice of the changes.

Systematic use of staff feedback could help to improve operational policies

Frontline staff are not consistently involved in policy development

- 3.100 We heard that Immigration New Zealand is involving frontline staff in the development of operational policy more than it used to. However, we were told that this is not yet systematic.
- 3.101 Staff in non-managerial roles talked about opportunities to provide feedback about a process after it had been introduced, but they were not always able to influence the design or development of those changes. One person described this as feeling that they had not been “taken along the journey”. Staff told us that working with policy-makers afterwards to find solutions can sometimes be time consuming and frustrating.
- 3.102 Some people told us that it was welcome, but unusual, to have adequate notice to prepare for changes or to have time to reflect on operational matters and provide meaningful input into the policy process. One senior staff member told us that they were working in a system where it was “very hard to do anything but run”.

32 These are Hong Kong, Ireland, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

33 These are Australia, Canada, China, Fiji, and Japan.

Staff have a wealth of knowledge that could help improve application processing

- 3.103 Including operational staff with experience of processing applications in policy development could lead to better outcomes for applicants and staff.
- 3.104 Managers in applicant-facing roles said that, in recent years, their team had been more involved in discussions about change than previously. They and their team felt listened to and “able to change as Immigration New Zealand changes”.
- 3.105 However, delays in implementing changes after staff had provided feedback sometimes caused frustration. For example, when staff identified inconsistencies between operating instructions for different visa types, Immigration New Zealand was slow to resolve those inconsistencies. We heard that senior managers in Immigration New Zealand had acknowledged this and were working to improve responsiveness.
- 3.106 Senior managers told us that Immigration New Zealand is looking at ways to better connect frontline staff to operational policy processes. We encourage Immigration New Zealand to draw on good practice, such as seconding people in particular roles to work on immigration policy, so that their involvement becomes a regular part of policy development.

The quality management system is designed to support improvement

4

- 4.1 In this Part, we look at the effectiveness of Immigration New Zealand’s quality management system for skilled residence visa decisions. The “quality management system” includes processes for quality control (which takes place before a decision is communicated to an applicant) and quality assurance (which takes place on samples of applications after decisions have been made).
- 4.2 We discuss:
- how the quality control process focuses on individual applications;
 - how reporting from the quality assurance process supports learning and development;
 - the vulnerability of the quality management system to pressures elsewhere in the immigration system;
 - the need for Immigration New Zealand to clarify the role of the Risk and Verification Team; and
 - the commitment Immigration New Zealand shows to managing quality in a difficult working environment.
- 4.3 We expected to see that the quality management system was working to promote fairness and consistency, so applicants could have confidence in Immigration New Zealand’s ability to achieve its aim of making quality decisions quickly.

Summary of findings

- 4.4 We found that frontline staff take pride in their roles and their responsibilities as decision-makers, understand the limits of their delegated authority, and want to do the best that they can for applicants and for New Zealand.
- 4.5 This is in keeping with MBIE’s Promise (see paragraph 2.15), specifically that people interacting with MBIE should feel “Safe – Haumarū: We help keep people safe through consistent application of the law.”
- 4.6 Quality control and quality assurance are clearly defined processes that work together to support improvement and staff development. There are clear roles and responsibilities for quality management, and the staff who have these responsibilities are experienced and committed to continuous improvement.
- 4.7 However, staffing pressures and the pressure to work quickly create risks to the quality management system. Immigration New Zealand needs to carefully manage these risks.

Quality control focuses on individual applications

- 4.8 Immigration New Zealand staff carry out quality control for every application for a skilled residence visa before the final decision is communicated to the applicant. In our view, this appropriately reflects the complexity and unique nature of each application.
- 4.9 Technical Advisers based in application processing teams carry out quality control. Technical Advisers check and score applications against four quality domains, using a set of questions specific to the type of visa being processed. They look at how well the Immigration Officer processing the application:
- complied with **immigration instructions**;
 - identified and mitigated **risks**;
 - followed **processes**, including those for communicating with applicants; and
 - wrote the decision **rationale** (the Immigration Officer’s reasoned explanation of their decision).
- 4.10 Figure 5 sets out the domains that Technical Advisers assess the quality of a decision against.

Figure 5
Domains that the quality of a decision are assessed against

Immigration instructions	Risks	Processes	Rationale
Instruction compliance	Risk identification	Warning and alert***	Well-written
Potential prejudicial information*	Verification	Data entry	Accurate
Exceptions to instructions**	Risk mitigation	Documentation	Logical
Health		AMS assessment records	Complete
Character		Communication	

* Applicants for residence visas are given an opportunity to comment before a decision is made to decline a visa because of any potentially prejudicial information, which the applicant might not necessarily be aware of. The Technical Adviser checks whether communication with an applicant about potentially prejudicial information should have been and was carried out and whether the Immigration Officer followed the correct procedures.

** If an applicant for a visa has not met the requirements of the relevant immigration instructions (the criteria that visa applicants must meet), an Immigration Officer may grant an exception to instructions in certain instances. The Technical Adviser checks whether the Immigration Officer followed the appropriate process.

*** The assessment process requires that Immigration Officers or Technical Advisers have identified and outlined any risks associated with an application. This process includes checking whether any alerts or warnings have been appropriately assessed during the decision-making process.

Reporting from the quality assurance process supports learning and improvement

- 4.11 Quality assurance complements quality control. It is a separate process from quality control and assesses quality retrospectively, using samples of decisions made in the previous three months. Immigration New Zealand told us that quality assurance is completed on random samples of decisions. The quality assurance process is designed to monitor trends in the quality of application processing and alert management to any issues.
- 4.12 Quality assurance uses the same four domains as quality control, but it has a separate set of questions. A team of staff carries out the quality assurance process for all the processing branches. Senior staff in Immigration New Zealand receive detailed reports from the quality assurance process.
- 4.13 We saw evidence that Immigration New Zealand is using information from the quality assurance process to support continuous improvement. Analysis of quality assessments for the Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa showed the reasoning for the visa decision (the rationale domain) scored the lowest of the four domains from April to June 2023, although it had been improving over the year.³⁴ Staff managing the day-to-day quality of decision-making in the Manukau office told us that this was a current focus for improvement.
- 4.14 Although the quality assurance process usually works on decisions from the previous three months, it can be adjusted when new visas are introduced.
- 4.15 We carried out our fieldwork during the early stages of the new Skilled Migrant Category Resident Visa. At this time, staff in the quality assurance teams were carrying out checks of the new visa category known as “fast follows”. These were designed to give timely advice and guidance to staff processing the new visas.
- 4.16 In our view, the quality control and quality assurance processes, taken together, support improvement and staff development well.
- 4.17 They apply consistently to processing applications for all visas, but also support analysis by visa type. This means that information about processing performance, including performance over time, can be compared specifically by visa type.
- 4.18 Managers can also use the detailed information about what is working well and what is working less well to support day-to-day improvement in processing teams.
- 4.19 Staff are also encouraged to use information from the quality management system to improve their decision-making. For example, they hold “quality circles” in their processing teams to share lessons from the quality management system.

³⁴ The rationale domain of the quality assessment looks at whether the reasons for the decision were well written, accurate, logical, and complete. A low score does not necessarily mean that a decision was incorrect.

Quality control is vulnerable to pressures elsewhere in the immigration system

- 4.20 The current quality control process for the skilled residence visa system is well suited to working with the individual nature of every application and decision. It takes account of each applicant's circumstances and the wide range of evidence they must provide to support their application.
- 4.21 However, checking every application before communicating the decision (100% checking for quality control) is resource intensive and time-consuming.
- 4.22 Making decisions about individual applications is complex. We heard that, at times, there can be pressure to process decisions more quickly or redeploy staff to other work priorities at short notice. Immigration New Zealand needs to carefully manage the risk to the quality control process that the pressure to work quickly can create.
- 4.23 When Immigration New Zealand introduced the Green List Tier 1 Straight to Residence Visas in 2022, it decided to do more targeted quality control checking for these visas (that is, it decided to check fewer than 100% of applications).
- 4.24 Because Green List Tier 1 Straight to Residence Visas were intended for highly skilled migrants in hard-to-fill occupations of importance to the country, Immigration New Zealand was expected to process this type of visa quickly.
- 4.25 Immigration New Zealand decided that it could apply a high-trust approach to occupations where a professional body required registration or certification.
- 4.26 When Immigration New Zealand decided to do quality control checks on only a sample of an Immigration Officer's applications, some staff expressed concern that this could be a risk to quality. Immigration New Zealand was not able to easily produce a random sample of applications, which meant that it was possible for an Immigration Officer to select decisions to put forward for checks.
- 4.27 To mitigate this risk, Immigration New Zealand agreed that it would move to sampling only after an Immigration Officer had achieved an acceptable quality assessment on nine out of 10 of their previous decisions. From then on, only two quality assessments of that officer's decisions would be conducted each month. However, all decisions to decline an application would still be quality checked before the final decision was communicated.
- 4.28 In contrast, Immigration New Zealand decided to do quality checks on 100% of applications when it developed the quality control system for the new Skilled Migrant Category and Work to Residence Visas in 2023. Immigration New Zealand considered that it was appropriate to treat quality checks differently for these

categories of visas because they did not have the same skills requirements of the Straight to Residence Visa.

- 4.29 In March 2024, Immigration New Zealand changed its approach and also started carrying out quality checks of all applications for the Green List Tier 1 Straight to Residence Visa. Immigration New Zealand told us it did this because changes to the Green List had increased the complexity of some applications.
- 4.30 We encourage Immigration New Zealand to continue to take this risk-based, case-by-case approach to decision-making when it is deciding how to manage quality risk for new visa types. It is important that any decision to move away from carrying out quality control checks for 100% of applications balances speed against the complexity of the decision-making process for a particular visa type.
- 4.31 For the current quality control process to work well, Immigration New Zealand needs to get this balance right each time it considers a change.

Immigration New Zealand needs to clarify the role of the Risk and Verification Team in the decision-making process

- 4.32 Immigration Officers follow specified triage processes to help them assess whether they need to seek advice from a separate Risk and Verification Team. The Risk and Verification Team is not part of the team that processes visas and manages quality control. It assists the decision-making process for visa applications by providing advice and guidance on issues that might present an immigration risk.
- 4.33 Immigration risk includes a wide category of concerns. It ranges from risks to security, such as false identities and fraudulent documentation, to the risk that migrants will be exploited in their workplaces. If the initial checking of an application indicates that any of these risks might be present, staff in the Risk and Verification Team provide Immigration Officers with advice on how to address these risks.
- 4.34 However, staff in the Risk and Verification Team told us they sometimes feel “out of the loop”. They cannot easily see how Immigration Officers apply their advice in practice, nor is there a way for them to learn how to improve their advice to make it more useful.
- 4.35 These staff felt that involving them in the decision-making process more systematically would help them to be more proactive in offering advice.
- 4.36 Staff in the Risk and Verification Team working on some temporary visa categories carry out risk monitoring reviews to assess completed applications. These reviews

report on whether Immigration Officers appropriately mitigated risk during the decision-making process. The reviews are not targeted at individual officers. They are designed to help increase understanding about how to improve practice in general.

- 4.37 The lessons learned from these reviews also help staff in the Risk and Verification Team to understand how Immigration Officers receive and use their advice.
- 4.38 In our view, there is an opportunity for Immigration New Zealand to build risk monitoring reviews into its assurance processes for skilled residence visas in the same way that they are already used for other visa types.

Staff showed commitment to managing the quality of decision-making in a challenging working environment

- 4.39 As part of understanding Immigration New Zealand's quality management system, we wanted to understand what challenges staff face in managing quality day to day. We also wanted to know whether Immigration New Zealand is managing these challenges effectively.
- 4.40 Staff talked to us about the specific challenges of working on applications for skilled residence visas. These included the pace of recent policy changes, the responsibility involved in making a decision because of all that it implies for an applicant's future, and the attention to detail that is needed to do the work well.
- 4.41 Some managers described themselves as "the meat in the sandwich" or the "tectonic plate", taking the strain of pressure to manage change and still make good decisions quickly. We also heard about change fatigue and the additional pressures of recruiting and retaining staff in what was, when we carried out our fieldwork, a competitive local job market.
- 4.42 Recruitment and retention issues present challenges for managing the quality of skilled residence processing because staff need experience to take on specialist roles, such as Practice Lead or Technical Adviser. Both these types of roles are best filled by people with previous processing experience who are well placed to advise others on best practice.
- 4.43 Despite these pressures, we heard that staff at all levels are working hard to manage change and support each other. People talked about their loyalty to careers at Immigration New Zealand, the close relationships they have with people in their teams, and the support that they provide each other with.

- 4.44 We also heard that Immigration New Zealand provides tools and training to help staff with their work and that these are well regarded. These tools and training include:
- templates for assessing an application for a visa;
 - standard operating practices for the process's key steps;
 - desktop guides for verifying overseas documents, with examples and recommended websites to consult; and
 - a classroom-based training programme for new Immigration Officers that combines theory with desk-based exercises.
- 4.45 In 2023, Immigration New Zealand introduced new senior leadership roles with responsibility for leading application processing operations in the processing offices, under the operational direction of the Chief Operating Officer of Immigration New Zealand.
- 4.46 Two Operations Director roles are based in New Zealand, and their responsibilities are split between the Northern/Pacific and Central/South regions. We were told that these leadership positions are responsible for working with staff to build a culture of continuous improvement in visa operations and for implementing new ways of working, including better connecting the Senior Leadership Team with frontline staff.
- 4.47 These roles were new when we carried out our audit. We consider that, as these roles develop, they could increase the understanding of senior managers of the specific challenges facing staff working on skilled residence visas.
- 4.48 These new roles will be particularly useful for improving Immigration New Zealand's use of staff feedback (see paragraphs 3.103-3.106). The roles should also help in developing operational policy, including managing the quality of decision-making.

5

Immigration New Zealand needs to use data more effectively

- 5.1 In this Part, we discuss how Immigration New Zealand could:
- gain deeper insights from the information that it holds; and
 - better explain the performance and outcomes of the skilled residence visa system.
- 5.2 We expected Immigration New Zealand to:
- systematically collect and analyse user information to help it understand what is working well and what is not;
 - use the data and insights it gains from collecting and analysing information to improve its performance for applicants; and
 - develop performance measures and reporting to help staff, applicants, Parliament, and the public to understand how well it is managing its decision-making about applications for skilled residence visas.

Summary of findings

- 5.3 Immigration New Zealand collects a wide range of information from its applicants. This allows it to monitor the number of applications for skilled residence visas it is processing and how long it takes to process them. This information is important for monitoring the skilled residence visa system.
- 5.4 However, Immigration New Zealand could use its information more effectively to understand how well its systems are working and to gain deeper insights about its applicants, their needs, and what employment and place of residence they choose once they are settled.
- 5.5 Immigration New Zealand could include this kind of information in its annual performance reporting. Including a wider range of data could improve the public's understanding of the skilled residence visa system and Immigration New Zealand's role in managing it.

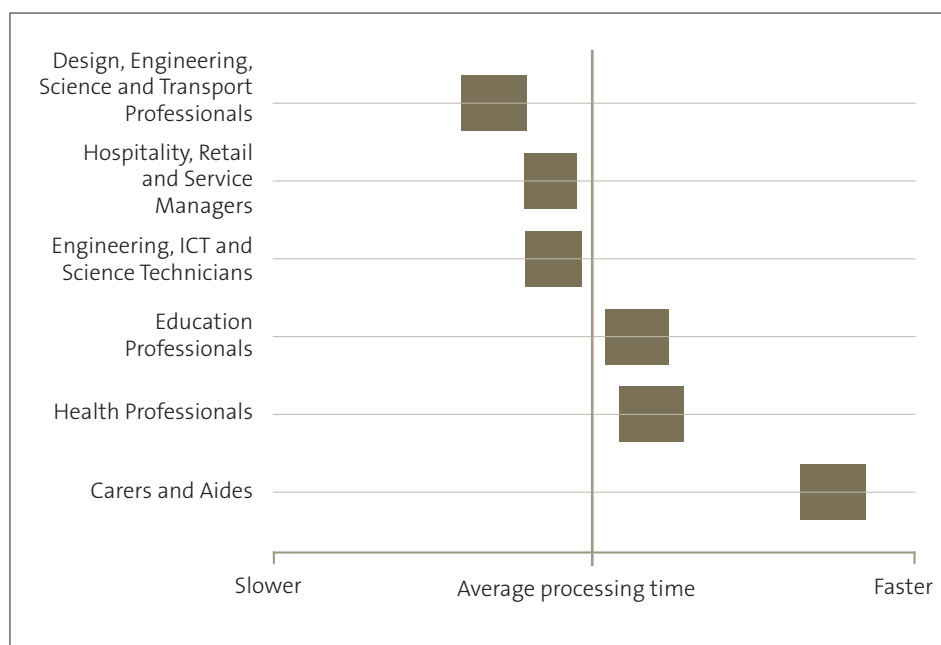
Immigration New Zealand could gain deeper insights from information it holds

Immigration New Zealand should use applicant data to improve its understanding of whether the system is working as intended

- 5.6 To understand whether the skilled residence visa system is working as intended, Immigration New Zealand needs to systematically monitor how well applicants move through the system, identify bottlenecks in processing applications, and know whether decisions about visa applications meet policy objectives.
- 5.7 We could not see that Immigration New Zealand routinely monitors applications or groups of applications to understand whether and why some move through the skilled residence visa system quicker than others.
- 5.8 For example, Immigration New Zealand does not regularly report on whether the system is working for different groups as intended or achieving policy objectives. In our view, it would be helpful for Immigration New Zealand's reporting to include analysis of application processing information by categories such as nationality, gender, or occupation.
- 5.9 These insights would allow Immigration New Zealand to check for patterns in how it processes applications. It could use this understanding to improve how the system works for applicants by adjusting its practice as needed.
- 5.10 To illustrate the potential use of Immigration New Zealand data, we analysed a sample of application data for skilled residence visa applications from September 2022 to December 2023, to identify how occupation affected wait times and outcomes for applications for skilled residence visas.³⁵
- 5.11 Figure 6 shows that some types of occupations experience faster processing times than others. This was true even when controlling for age, gender, and nationality. For example, from the sample we looked at, we can see that Carers and Aides are consistently being processed at a faster rate than all other occupations, while Design, Engineering, Science, and Transport professionals consistently experience the slowest visa processing times of occupation groups, below the mean processing time of the visas we looked at (of 4.2 months). The width of the bars in Figure 6 gives an indication of the variability in processing times for the different occupation types.

35 The dataset included anonymised data for 13,613 applications for the period September 2022 to December 2023, which represents the period of skilled residence visa processing activity from the re-opening of the border to the beginning of our audit. It includes Straight to Residence Visas, Skilled Migrant Category Visas (including the new Skilled Migrant Category Visa from the opening of the scheme in October 2023), and Care Workforce and Transport Work to Residence Visas.

Figure 6
Likelihood of faster visa processing, by occupation type, from September 2022 to December 2023



Source: Immigration New Zealand's data.

- 5.12 We also saw that some groups of occupations were more likely to be approved than others. For example, although general approval rates were high for the period from September 2022 to December 2023 (a 98% approval rate), we could see that occupations under the category of health professionals had their applications approved at a higher rate than other occupation groups such as ICT professionals. This was true even when controlling for age, gender, and nationality.
- 5.13 In our view, this type of analysis could help Immigration New Zealand to understand whether its system is working as intended. Even if processing times and outcomes overall seem to be working well, this kind of analysis could help to identify and fix problems in specific areas and to check the effect of any policy changes.

- 5.14 For example, since we did this work, approval rates have decreased for skilled residence visas.³⁶ The kind of analysis we have done, repeated regularly, would help Immigration New Zealand to understand whether particular factors are causing these changes in approval rates (for example, the introduction of new visa types, new processing instructions, or characteristics of applicants, such as occupation or nationality).
- 5.15 Publishing this kind of information could also improve the public's understanding of how well the skilled residence visa system is working for applicants.

Immigration New Zealand could use information to better understand why applications are delayed

- 5.16 In our view, Immigration New Zealand could also use information from the application processing system to better understand bottlenecks or issues in the processing of applications for skilled residence visas.
- 5.17 When an Immigration Officer needs further information from an applicant and/or a third party before they can continue assessing the application or make a decision about it, the application becomes “non-actionable”.
- 5.18 Immigration New Zealand currently uses the Applicant Management System to assess applications for skilled residence visas. There are standardised ways of recording why an application is non-actionable, called “bring up reason codes” (reason codes).
- 5.19 A reason code should be accompanied by a “bring up due date” to specify when the application will once again become actionable. These dates help Immigration Officers manage their workloads.
- 5.20 When we looked at the data, the four reason codes given for information most often missing from applications, from most to least frequently, were:
- further information requested from the applicant;
 - a foreign police check (supplied by the applicant);
 - a National Security Check; and
 - a medical assessment.
- 5.21 Some non-actionable applications did not have accompanying reasons.

³⁶ For 2023/24, the approval rate for skilled residence visas was about 93%, according to information taken from Immigration New Zealand's Migration Data Explorer (see immigration.govt.nz).

- 5.22 In our view, reason codes could be used to help Immigration New Zealand to gain further insights about the decision-making process. Using them consistently, and analysing their use, could help Immigration New Zealand to better understand what factors most commonly hold up applications. It could then use this understanding to inform its guidance for applicants on how to improve their applications.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment make better use of the information it already collects to monitor the effectiveness of the skilled residence visa system for specific groups of applicants and to help it target improvements.

Immigration New Zealand needs to better explain the performance and outcomes of the skilled residence visa system

Annual performance reporting should give the public a good overview of an organisation's performance

- 5.23 We wanted to see whether MBIE was applying good practice to its annual performance reporting on the work of Immigration New Zealand.
- 5.24 In our view, good performance reporting is:
- concise, relevant, and understandable;
 - focused on what matters to users;
 - balanced about what went well and what did not; and
 - capable of giving a good overview of the organisation's performance.³⁷

Annual performance reporting about immigration does not consistently focus on the skilled residence visa system

- 5.25 MBIE reports annually on several measures about visa application processing. The reporting includes measures of applicant satisfaction and the quality of decisions about residence visas. MBIE publishes this information in its annual report and on Immigration New Zealand's website.

³⁷ Controller and Auditor-General, Audit New Zealand, and the Treasury (2022), *Good practice in reporting about performance*, at oag.parliament.nz.

- 5.26 The published performance information for 2022/23 that is relevant to applicants for skilled residence visas included:³⁸
- the percentage of visa applicants satisfied with the overall experience of applying for a visa;
 - the quality of residence visa decisions: percentage rated as accurate;
 - the average monthly percentage of new registrations entered into the New Zealand Now database whose occupations match those at skill levels 1-3 under the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations;³⁹ and
 - the percentage of recent migrants who feel that New Zealand is their home.
- 5.27 These performance measures provide high-level information about Immigration New Zealand's work from both a process and applicant perspective. They focus on outcomes that matter to users, such as how satisfied people are with the process of applying.
- 5.28 However, in our view, the information does not show how well the skilled residence visa system is working. None of the current measures have this focus because they do not consider skilled residence as a specific category. The measure of skill levels gets the closest to doing this, but covers people who register their intention to live and work in New Zealand rather than visa applicants specifically.
- 5.29 We consider that the current lack of reporting specifically about the skilled residence visa system is a weakness, given the significance attached to the skills that this group of migrants is expected to bring to New Zealand. In addition, Immigration New Zealand and the public would be better placed to understand the effects of changes to the skilled residence visa system (see Figure 1) if performance reporting about this part of the immigration system were available.
- 5.30 In our view, there is significant public interest in how well the skilled residence visa system is meeting its objectives, and the current suite of measures that MBIE reports do not show this aspect of its performance.

38 When we carried out this audit, MBIE's most recently published annual report was for 2022/23. We have taken the wording of these measures from that report.

39 The New Zealand Now database is a website that Immigration New Zealand provides for potential migrants to register their interest in applying for a visa. The five skill levels under the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations refer to the level of skill that is typically needed to competently perform the tasks of a particular occupation. Level 1 is the highest, and an occupation at this level needs the equivalent of a bachelor's degree or higher qualification to perform.

Some annual performance measures lack clarity and consistency

- 5.31 MBIE could also do more to make the measures easier for the public to understand. For example, “quality of residence visa decisions: percentage rated as accurate” lacks context about how quality is managed. This makes it hard for a member of the public who does not have specialist knowledge of the immigration system to understand what is being measured.
- 5.32 MBIE also did not report on the full year for 2021/22 and 2022/23. Partial year reporting makes it harder for the public to understand whether an organisation’s performance is improving.
- 5.33 Changes in MBIE’s measures from year to year also make it hard to take a long-term view, especially if the organisation does not clearly explain the reasons for the change.
- 5.34 In its 2022/23 annual report, MBIE said that its measure for the average monthly percentage of new registrations entered into the New Zealand Now database (see paragraph 5.26) would change to a raw count of the number of registrations for skilled occupations.
- 5.35 Both of these measures are potentially relevant to understanding the performance of the skilled residence visa system. However, MBIE did not give readers any contextual information about the measures to explain why it changed the measure or how the two measures compare.
- 5.36 Presenting its performance information in a way that is relevant to its readers would help MBIE to improve the public’s understanding of Immigration New Zealand’s work.

Immigration New Zealand needs to report more effectively to the public about the skilled residence visa system

- 5.37 Immigration New Zealand makes a range of data about the skilled residence visa system available to the public through its website and the Migration Data Explorer database.
- 5.38 Immigration New Zealand explains that the Migration Data Explorer is a tool that replaces the annual *Migration Trends* report (see paragraph 5.43). It includes information about current and historical skilled residence visa numbers, visa decisions, and the nationality and occupations of people receiving residence visas.
- 5.39 Although the tool contains a large amount of information about processing and outcomes, it is not a substitute for meaningful reporting to help Parliament and the public understand how well the skilled residence visa system is working.

- 5.40 In our view, Immigration New Zealand should interpret this information for the public further to help increase understanding of the performance of the skilled residence visa system.

Recommendation 4

We recommend that the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment review its approach to reporting on the performance of the immigration system to ensure that applicants, Parliament, and the public can gain a clear understanding of how well the skilled residence visa system is performing.

Immigration New Zealand could improve its reporting on the longer-term outcomes of the skilled residence visa system

- 5.41 Improved reporting on the longer-term outcomes of the skilled residence visa system would help Parliament and the public better understand whether it is working as intended.
- 5.42 In our view, MBIE could give the public better information about the effectiveness of the skilled residence visa system by collecting longer-term information about outcomes for people who receive skilled residence visas. This could include asking for information about the occupations skilled migrants currently hold and whether they have stayed in New Zealand in the longer term.
- 5.43 MBIE published this information for many years. The *Migration Trends* report provided information about the number of permanent residents remaining in New Zealand after five years as a measure of retention. However, when we carried out our audit, the most recent report available on MBIE's website was for 2016/17.⁴⁰
- 5.44 We were also able to view other reports about longer-term outcomes for migrants on MBIE's website, including:
- *Regional migration trends* reports from 2016;
 - the report *Settling in New Zealand: Migrant survey trends from 2015 to 2019*;
 - summary results from the 2021 and 2022 migrant surveys; and
 - a report on the settlement experience of Pacific migrants to New Zealand from 2012/13 to 2016/17.
- 5.45 These reports contain useful information about migrant sentiment and trends in migrant behaviours.

40 See "Migration Trends report" at mbie.govt.nz.

- 5.46 In our view, MBIE should regularly evaluate and publish information from sources such as this in one place, with a specific focus on skilled residence visa applicants. This would help MBIE to improve its understanding of whether the skilled residence visa system is meeting the needs of New Zealand and report that information to the public.

Recommendation 5

We recommend that the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment develop an approach to reviewing and reporting on the long-term outcomes of the skilled residence visa system that will allow Immigration New Zealand, Parliament, and the public to see how well the system is working to attract and retain the skills that New Zealand needs over time.

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