



Te Kawa Mataaho

Public Service Commission

MEDIA STATEMENT

27 February 2024

Review into administration of work force visa scheme released

Deputy Public Service Commissioner Heather Baggott has today released the findings of a review into the administration of the Accredited Employer Work Visa (AEWV) scheme.

The independent review was led by Jenn Bestwick. The objective of the review was to determine whether Immigration New Zealand's (INZ) administration of the scheme is being carried out appropriately, with a focus on mitigating the risk of migrant exploitation and irregular migration.

The review identified possible improvements to the scheme. It found:

- With the opening of the borders post Covid in June 2022, and employers needing migrant labour, INZ introduced new operational settings to reduce visa processing times and respond to the extraordinary demand from employers.
- These settings reduced the number of checks that immigration officers were required to do to maintain processing times.
- INZ's decision to change the settings, to address the immediate need for access to migrant workers, was reasonable in the circumstances.
- INZ did not adequately assess the risk and impact of these changes to speed up processing times, against the increased risk of visa system abuse.
- The focus on meeting visa processing timeframes and volumes overrode risk considerations.
- When INZ staff did raise concerns about the risks, leadership at INZ failed to pay adequate attention.
- Between 27 July 2022 and 30 June 2023, the visa scheme was exposed to an increased risk of exploitation by unscrupulous agents or employers.
- INZ has made, and continue to make, a number of changes to improve the administration of the work visa scheme service.

Following Covid-19, New Zealand fully opened its borders to workers in July 2022. The newly designed Accredited Employer Work Visa scheme started the same month.

INZ is a part of the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment.

Ms Baggott said the changes to the Accredited Employer Work Visa scheme did not work as intended and INZ could have done more to minimise the risk of abuse of the work visa system.

INZ should have assessed the risk before implementing the changes, and reviewed the impact of the changes, which would have identified any faults or risks due to the reduction of verification checks.

“Immigration New Zealand implemented, very quickly, a new model to accelerate immigration at a time the country desperately needed skilled workers,” said Ms Baggott.

“While it was unscrupulous employers who exploited migrants coming into the country, Immigration New Zealand could have, and should have, done more to minimise the risk of that happening.

“The chief executive has since made, or is undertaking, the necessary changes to ensure the scheme continues to meet the needs of employers while better protecting migrant workers coming into New Zealand.

“I expect the chief executive will continue to make improvements in line with the recommendations identified in the report. And the chief executive has assured me this will happen.”

The review did not examine the appropriateness of the policy settings or consider the merits of individual visa application decisions, unless they related to any wider issues of process. The review also did not examine decisions made during the migrant step of the process, or make recommendations in relation to individual cases.

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