

National releases plan to fix 'broken immigration system'

5:36pm

National today released a plan it says will clear the current residency backlog and provide a pathway for skilled migrants already in New Zealand to gain residency.



Source: Breakfast

Judith Collins says the Government has "completely broken our immigration system" over the last four years.

"We now have the longest queues for residence in our history and record wait times for getting residence visas processed," Collins said.

"We can't afford to lose any more doctors, engineers, teachers and IT workers because they have no certainty around when they can become a resident.

"These people have played a pivotal role in getting New Zealand through

the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic."

Collins believes that National has a plan to "fix the issue" in the form of the Covid Contribution Visa.

"The first thing we will do is clear the residency backlog. We will unfreeze the residency pool and streamline and fast-track residency processing to clear the backlog of more than 30,000 applications.

"Then we need to offer our migrant workers here a pathway to residency. These are our dairy farmer workers, aged care workers, truck drivers, construction workers and hospitality staff who are in New Zealand because there was a skills shortage.

"Finally, we will decouple visas from a specific employer to stop migrant exploitation. A smarter approach is bonding people to sectors and regions which would make sure the right skills are in the right regions.

"This pathway would be through a 'Covid Contribution Visa', which would give our valuable migrants the ability, time and surety to apply for residence," Collins said.

She adds that the visa would be expected to affect around 35,000 essential skill workers and their families over the next few years.

ACT immigration spokesperson Dr James McDowall also issued a statement on the matter today.

"ACT would speed up residency for highly skilled persons by unfreezing the Expression of Interest (EOI) queue immediately, by resuming applications for those offshore. This would give a clear pathway for residency for skilled migrants," McDowall said.

"There are much needed skilled migrants, like doctors, who are living with uncertainty about whether they can stay. Nobody would blame them if they packed up and left.

"This Government claims to be one of kindness but the way it's treating

migrants is cruel. It's time for the Government to do what's right."

Green Party MP Ricardo Menéndez March doesn't think the plans go far enough.

"It's great to see more parties supporting decoupling work visas from single employers and pathways to residency - but simply fast tracking the current backlog won't do it. We must also remove the barriers preventing low income migrants and disabled people from accessing residency."

The comments come as the Government in May signalled plans for what it called 'once-in-a-generation reset' of the immigration system, saying it was determined to keep the tap tight on migration once borders reopen.

Regional Development Minister Stuart Nash said the Government wanted to move New Zealand away from relying on low-skilled workers to attracting those with higher skills.

At the time, he said the reset would be about "managing the benefits and impacts of immigration as one of the levers for achieving the outcomes we want for New Zealand's economy".

"This means getting the right mix of people and skills to ensure we're meeting our economic objectives, minimizing pressure on our infrastructure – such as housing - and ensuring Kiwis have job opportunities."

At the start of last month, there were nearly 10,300 expressions of interest for the skilled migrants residence visa. Priority for allocation to an immigration assessor is given to those earning more than \$106,000. But even once an application's been selected from the pool, it can take up to two years for residency to be granted - up from nine months in 2018.

The Government is also working on RSE workers from Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu who come to New Zealand to enter Aotearoa without going through MIQ, in a bid to ease some of the demand for seasonal workers.