



Briefing Note: Police vet delays in the early learning sector

To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education		
Date:	5 July 2021	Priority:	Low
Security Level:	In Confidence	METIS No:	1263257
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Messaging seen by Communications team:	No	Round Robin:	No

Purpose of Report

Your office commissioned this briefing to provide information about Police vetting delays and what engagement the Ministry has had with NZ Police on the issue.

Note that there are currently delays in processing Police vet requests for the early learning sector and NZ Police advise they are doing everything they can to improve their service levels, and

Note the annual Police vet volume peak has passed and we anticipate continued improvements in response times, and

Note we have provided guidance to the early learning sector as there is some evidence of services requesting Police vets when they are not required.

Summary

- Adults working in early learning services must be Police vetted. Almost 70% of the teacher-led early learning sector are already vetted through the Teaching Council teacher certification process.
- Annually, March to May are the busiest months for the vetting service. The sector has raised concerns about current delays, which the Ministry has shared with NZ Police.
- NZ Police are working on some proposals to improve the vetting service, and the Ministry supports these initiatives.

Background

1. Children's workers must be Police vetted as part of a more comprehensive safety check required by the Children's Act 2014. Nearly everyone working in the early learning sector is a children's worker. The vet must be obtained before a prospective children's worker begins work.
2. Anyone else appointed to work in an early learning service during licensed hours must be Police vetted in accordance with the Education and Training Act 2020. The vet must be obtained before the person has unsupervised access to children.
3. The Teaching Council obtains a Police vet for teachers as part of their registration and practicing certification process. Almost 70% of teaching staff in teacher-led centre-based early learning services hold a current practising certificate (2020 Education Counts data). Early learning services can rely on the Teaching Council's vet, in lieu of obtaining their own, but some services may seek their own vet anyway.
4. Early learning service providers are responsible for obtaining Police vets for all non-certificated workers. Vets obtained by one employer cannot be shared with another employer, so each employer must obtain their own vets directly from Police.
5. Police vetting is a fundamental component of child protection, as early learning services use the information released in a vet to assess whether an adult poses a risk to children.
6. There is a cost to early learning services to using the vetting service (about \$10 per vet request).

Vets are currently taking longer than NZ Police's service level of 20 working days

7. There will always be a certain percentage of vetting requests that are complex and will take longer than the 20-working day service standard.
8. NZ Police have an electronic process, Automated Identify Matching (A.I.M) to help manage their queue of requests. Provided an application meets certain criteria, it will be automatically processed and released by the system. Overall, this accounts for approximately 14% of the total vetting requests they receive.
9. There is always a queue of vets to process, but the current queue of vets means processing times for some vet requests are exceeding the usual standard, with some of those taking up to 28 days to process.
10. A considerable number of requests continue to be processed well within 20 working days – approximately 30% within 10 working days, and a further 30% within 11-20 working days.

An urgent vetting service is available for critical or crisis situations

11. The Ministry worked with NZ Police several years ago to put an urgent vetting provision in place for the education sector. This was in response to timing concerns raised by

sector organisations. This process enables urgent requests to go to the top of the queue, but it is subject to demand.

12. The urgent service is available to early learning services (and schools) that need to urgently recruit new core children's workers to maintain or increase staff ratios in a critical or crisis situation.
13. Criteria apply, and if the vet meets those criteria, NZ Police will return the vet request within 2-5 working days. If the vet does not meet the criteria, it will be processed according to standard timeframes. The Ministry set the criteria, in consultation with education sector representatives.
14. NZ Police and the Ministry monitor the use of this service.

Early learning sector organisations have raised concerns about delays in obtaining Police vets

15. Some sector organisations have raised concerns about the impact of delayed vet processing times on early learning service providers.
16. Some are reporting that the delays are compounding existing recruitment challenges, already protracted due to a limited supply of available candidates. They also report that the current standard 20 working day timeframe is too long for providers that might need to recruit staff at short notice.
17. The Ministry meets regularly with the NZ Police vetting service to resolve operational issues and has shared the early learning sector's concerns about current vet processing times. NZ Police acknowledge the concerns and have provided assurance that they are doing everything they can to improve their service levels as quickly as possible.
18. NZ Police report that the increased volumes are mainly due to high demand, which is typical for this time of year – March to May are the busiest months for the vetting service. 206,000 vetting requests were received in the period January-April 2021, which is the highest ever received in that time period.
19. In a recent bulletin sent to all early learning service providers, the Ministry reminded the sector that they don't need to obtain a Police vet for teachers who hold a current practising certificate or where a service is purchased with existing staff and vets have already been obtained. Despite this advice, we are aware that some services request their own vets anyway. We have also heard of scenarios where services request NZ Police vets for shortlisted candidates.
20. The Ministry is currently consulting on proposals to amend the Police vetting provisions in the Education and Training Act 2020 to align them more closely with the safety checking provisions in the Children's Act 2014. Alongside their feedback on the proposals being consulted on, a number of submitters commented on the problems associated with the delays in obtaining Police vets and not being able to share vets.
21. The sector supports the idea that Police vets should be portable, 'travelling' with the worker between employers.

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Proactive Release

27. We recommend that this Briefing is proactively released as per your expectation that information be released as soon as possible. Any information which may need to be withheld will be done so in line with the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982.

Proactive Release

Agree that the Ministry of Education release this briefing in full once it has been considered by you.

☒ Agree / ☐ Disagree



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5/7/21



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education

15/7/21