



Zali Steggall MP

FEDERAL MEMBER FOR WARRINGAH

Thursday 20 August, 2020

The Hon Peter Dutton MP
Minister for Home Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

I write to you on behalf of the community of Warringah and the numerous constituents who have contacted my office in regards to overseas travel exemptions.

I thank the staff in your Department for the tremendous work they are doing in processing the thousands of requests being received from people across Australia. I acknowledge that these are unprecedented times and that the Department acted very quickly to adapt to the imposition of travel restrictions. I appreciate that the processes are evolving and I commend the department for recent improvements that have been made to the website and to the overall process.

As a result of assisting with a number of cases, my staff and I have identified some ways in which the information and the website could be even clearer and the overall process simplified. We hope that these suggested changes assist the Department in processing the large number of applications and managing the expectations of those applying.

Timeframes and Expectations:

1. Many people have contacted us with concerns about the delays in processing as some have not received a response before their intended travel date. The Department of Home Affairs website currently indicates a processing time of 4 weeks but we suggest that adding a phrase “or longer” would assist with managing expectations.
2. At present, some applicants receive their determination less than 24 hours before their departure. We feel this is not reasonable as it does not allow time for adequate travel preparation, can lead to great angst as well as added costs. We understand the reason for this is so the determination best reflects the current health situation but we feel that a determination should be provided one week before the intended travel date. This is especially recommended as the Department’s own advice to applicants is not to purchase airline tickets until they receive a determination. It is counter productive to encourage a situation where people have to nominate a departure date, wait until the day before then, if approved, book a ticket and organise other travel arrangements in the space of 24 hours.
3. A large number of the approaches we are receiving are from non-residents on valid visas seeking to return to Australia. Very few of these applications appear to be successful. We feel there could be stronger messaging on the website that for applications of this type, it is very that they will succeed unless they can demonstrate compassionate or compelling circumstances or if they have essential skills.
4. For some groups of applicants, there is no clear list of documentation that should accompany their exemption application. For example in the case of the death of a loved one or a serious illness, it would assist if a suggested list of documents could be provided. Such a list would assist applicants in providing the most detailed and comprehensive application possible.

Criteria:

5. A large number of the applications we are receiving are in regards to parents with valid visas not being allowed in. We feel this issue could be addressed if the definition of “immediate family members” was expanded to include “parents of a citizen or permanent resident, where the parents have a valid visa to travel to Australia”.

Technical Issues:

6. The login and verification process when applying for an exemption is unclear and not well explained. A few constituents have had trouble logging in for the first time. We have found that in many cases, this is because the pop up notice prompting applicants to go to their email and verify their address only appears very briefly at the top of the screen. We would recommend that this pop up notice needs to be far more prominent and should remain on the screen until the person has verified their email. This is common practice for other registration processes.
7. It appears that some users have difficulty in registering an application depending on the device they are using, especially when an Apple Mac device is used. We have also been asked if there is a preferred internet browser to use with the portal - if so this should be clearly indicated on the website.
8. Many constituents have complained that they have not received a confirmation email that their application has been received. In some instances, the message has gone to their Junk folder or Spam folder. It would be helpful if the pop up message on the portal clearly states that people should check their Junk and Spam folders for the confirmation email. Again, this is common practice with other organisations when sending out confirmation emails.
9. Some constituents who were leaving indefinitely were forced to enter a return date when this is unnecessary. Instead, there should be an option for applicants to show "no known return date".
10. Constituents have complained that their applications for exemptions have been rejected but no explanation was given for the refusal and there are no avenues of appeal.

Provision of determinations:

11. When exemption applications are refused, no advice is given on what further information could be provided to strengthen any future application.

12. A few granted exemptions have found their way into Junk Mail. Again, this could be addressed by a message at the beginning of the process that encourages the applicant to check their Junk mail and Spam folder for any message.
13. There is no indication provided of the duration of an exemption – whether it can be used within one week, one month, one year etc. It would be helpful if a timeframe for the exemption was clearly provided.
14. A few granted exemptions have been incorrectly addressed to the wrong individual, causing confusion to the recipient.

Other matters:

15. In regards to the issue of caps on flights and passenger numbers, this is creating considerable distress for either returning Australians or those overseas who have been granted an exemption to enter Australia. We are aware that the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission is investigating allegations of price fixing and / or market manipulation. It is clear that the Government restrictions are having an unintended consequence. I fully support the need for compulsory hotel quarantine for all overseas arrivals, and that the cost of this should be borne by the individual but with that measure in place, it is unclear why increased arrivals represent an unacceptable health risk. It would be helpful if the Government can communicate an intended time frame for when the caps will be lifted or what conditions need to be met for the caps to be lifted. I would therefore urge the Government to consider relaxing the current caps on international flights, while still enforcing the strict quarantine rules for all returning passengers.

Whilst I appreciate certain measures were taken by Government in its immediate response to reducing the transmission and the threat of the virus, longer term policies to enable Australia to operate in a COVID world are now needed.

I thank you for taking the time to read through my suggestions and I look forward to your reply.

Yours Sincerely,



Zali Steggall, OAM MP
Federal Member for Warringah