



Briefing

INITIAL ADVICE ON EXPANDING QUARANTINE FREE TRAVEL

To: Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

Date	27/05/2021	Priority	Medium
Deadline	N/A	Briefing Number	DPMC-2020/21-938

Purpose

You have requested advice on how quarantine free travel may be expanded. This paper provides initial advice on the opportunities and risks in expanding quarantine free travel to other low risk jurisdictions over the next six months as part of our strategy for reconnecting New Zealanders. It also seeks agreement to develop further advice on next steps for one-way quarantine free travel from the Pacific.

Recommendations

- Note** that New Zealand's Elimination Strategy takes a precautionary approach to protect our vulnerable populations from COVID-19 while enabling safe quarantine free travel that supports New Zealand's economic and social recovery.
- Note** that preparations for two-way quarantine free travel with Niue are ongoing ^{s9(2)(f)(iv)} [REDACTED]
- Note** that health and border workforces and systems are at capacity with preparing for and managing two-way quarantine free travel with Australia, the Cook Islands, ^{s9(2)(f)(iv)} [REDACTED]
- Note** that embedding the quarantine free travel arrangements with Australia, the Cook Islands and, subsequently, Niue is the priority.
- Note** that the biggest risk with quarantine free travel in the Pacific is exporting COVID-19 to vulnerable jurisdictions and that one-way quarantine free arrangements from the Pacific can mitigate this risk.


6. **Direct** officials to provide advice on what expanding one-way quarantine free travel from other low risk Pacific jurisdictions to New Zealand could look like, until such time as those jurisdictions are sufficiently vaccinated to allow two-way travel. **YES** NO

7. s9(2)(f)(iv) [Redacted]

8. **Agree** to proactively release this paper as part of a suite of papers relating to decisions to reopen the border after public announcements about the strategy for reconnecting New Zealand are made. **YES** NO

9. **Agree** to forward a copy of this briefing to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and border Ministers. **YES** NO


 Ruth Fairhall
 Head of Policy and Strategy,
 COVID-19 Group
 27/5/2021


 Hon Chris Hipkins
 Minister for COVID-19 Response
 02/06/2021

Contact for telephone discussion if required:

Name	Position	Telephone	1st contact
Ruth Fairhall	Head of Strategy and Policy COVID-19 Group	N/A s9(2)(a)	✓
Megan Stratford	Principal Policy Advisor	N/A s9(2)(a)	

Minister's office comments:

- Noted
- Seen
- Approved
- Needs change
- Withdrawn
- Not seen by Minister
- Overtaken by events
- Referred to

INITIAL ADVICE ON EXPANDING QUARANTINE FREE TRAVEL

Executive Summary

1. Reopening New Zealand's borders to low risk jurisdictions provides opportunities to reconnect socially, boost our economic recovery and return to a sense of normality for New Zealanders.
2. The Elimination Strategy frames how New Zealand manages the risks posed by COVID-19 and how the borders can be reopened safely. Until such time as the vaccination roll out is complete, New Zealand is taking a precautionary approach to reopening to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 outbreaks as more travellers cross our borders.
3. The ongoing management of quarantine free travel (QFT) with Australia, along with implementing two-way QFT with the Cook Islands ^{s9(2)(f)(iv)} is taking our health and border systems and workforces to capacity. ^{s9(2)(g)(i)}
[REDACTED]
4. ^{s6(a)}
[REDACTED]
5. New Zealand needs to use other risk mitigation measures (such as smarter technology, one way QFT only, limiting to vaccinated travellers, or limiting to specific visa categories) to ensure any additional arrangements can be safely resourced, or take a more risk tolerant approach.
6. Officials consider a reasonable next step is to explore one-way QFT to New Zealand from low risk Pacific jurisdictions such as Samoa, Tokelau and Tonga, while allowing time for the current QFTs to bed in. This may present a safe and manageable approach to expanding QFT in the Pacific. Two-way QFT could potentially be considered when vaccination programmes in those jurisdictions are sufficiently advanced to afford population protection from outbreaks.
7. Reflecting our understanding of your recent conversations with Cabinet colleagues, officials will continue to engage with other jurisdictions, including ^{s6(a)} to explore how QFT could be progressed in the future, without commencing formal discussions. This provides an opportunity for New Zealand to prepare for alternative QFT models, taking into consideration vaccination roll outs and developments in technology.
8. New Zealand and Niuean officials continue to prepare for the health support that Niue will need to enable two-way QFT. ^{s9(2)(f)(iv)}
[REDACTED]

Reconnecting New Zealanders

9. New Zealand has started to cautiously relax border settings to support economic recovery and re-establish social connection with family and friends overseas. This is being achieved through QFT arrangements with Australia and Cook Islands, and through the opening up of managed isolation and quarantine spaces for specific cohorts of critical workers and refugees. We are also preparing for two-way QFT with Niue.
10. In April 2021, officials provided you with initial thinking on a phased approach to reconnecting our people to the world. The Elimination Strategy continues to inform our approach through these phases, to protect vulnerable populations from COVID-19.
11. This paper provides initial advice on the next steps for country by country reopening as part of a longer journey before the new 'end-state' is reached. The later stages of reopening will build on the country by country approach of the existing QFT arrangements and will be enabled through the advancement of vaccination programmes domestically and overseas.

Update on QFT with Niue

s9(2)(f)(iv)



s6(a)



Lessons from quarantine free travel with Australia, the Cook Islands

s9(2)(f)(iv)


17. Much of the success in reaching QFT arrangements with Australia and the Cook Islands can be attributed to the existing relationships between our nations, which have supported the negotiation process.
18. However, the current arrangements have also highlighted areas where our model for designing and operating QFT can be enhanced.

The design process to set up QFT arrangements is lengthy and resource intensive...

19. Officials began the negotiation process with Australia in May 2020 and with Cook Islands in July 2020, meaning it has taken almost a year to finalise QFT arrangements for the two jurisdictions.
20. One of the key inputs into this process is our assessment of the partner QFT country's health system. This process is required to build our confidence in their ability to manage COVID-19 cases and ensure the risk of possible transmission to travellers to New Zealand is low. The assessment is different for every potential QFT partner country and requires considerable time and resource investment. ^{s6(a)}

21. A significant challenge when designing arrangements with more developed jurisdictions is working with their well-established and often complex health and reporting systems.

... and so is maintaining these arrangements.

22. Maintenance of the QFT arrangement with Australia requires extensive resourcing, both in relation to workforce and infrastructure needs. Our border systems were not designed for this rate of change. ^{s6(a)}

23. While we are yet to understand the impact of maintaining the Cook Islands QFT arrangement once it commences, it is highly likely we will need to invest additional resources to support their health system to manage any COVID-19 cases or outbreaks.
24. Capacity to respond to and manage multiple QFT arrangements needs to be carefully considered given that the arrangements for each QFT zone will be bespoke, subject to the partner QFT country's unique situation and how we manage the individual and cumulative public health risk to New Zealand.
25. It should also be noted that health officials working on maintaining QFT arrangements are the same workforce that will respond to any domestic COVID-19 outbreaks, and all officials involved are also required to establish new QFT partner jurisdictions. This puts further pressures on an already stretched public sector that is trying to manage domestic COVID-19 risk and our vaccination roll out.

Considering a shift towards a risk-based re-engagement approach

26. As we progress along a pathway towards re-opening our border to the rest of the world, our rationale for re-connection with other jurisdictions will need to be re-examined and re-defined, and our approach to re-engagement could, over time, shift towards a more risk-based framework. This approach could allow us to reconnect with other jurisdictions that we assess as low risk in a way that is grounded in our Elimination Strategy. However, more work needs to be done to establish the application and feasibility of such a model in the New Zealand setting.

Framework for assessing new QFT opportunities

27. Officials propose using the following criteria to develop advice on further country by country QFT arrangements:

- a) **Which jurisdictions are low risk?** The decision to commence QFT with any jurisdiction is grounded in the Ministry of Health's assessment of risk. Only those jurisdictions assessed as low risk will be considered for QFT.

s6(a)

c) **Is the other country also interested in QFT with New Zealand?** And with our existing QFT partners? Is there an option to collaborate with Australia?

d) **Can we manage QFT safely within the available limits of our health and border systems and workforces?** The cumulative risks of additional QFT arrangements should be considered. If full two-way QFT cannot be safely resourced, consider mitigation measures including:

- i) s9(2)(f)(iv)
- ii) limiting QFT to one way
- iii) limiting QFT to vaccinated travellers
- iv) continued use of pre-departure measures
- v) use of smarter technology.

How do we assess low risk jurisdictions?

28. If we are, over time, to move towards a re-engagement approach focused on low risk jurisdictions, a risk assessment model will need to be agreed and tested. This is likely to also be an important component of risk assessment under future approaches to re-engagement in addition to consideration of individual factors such as vaccination status.

29. The Ministry of Health has begun work to build on the high-risk country risk assessment tool to determine how to apply it to the assessment of whether a country is low risk.

30. s9(2)(f)(iv)

31. There may also be merit in focusing our attention on jurisdictions that are pursuing similar elimination strategies to New Zealand, in addition to incidence and reporting certainty.

32. s9(2)(f)(iv)

Possible new jurisdictions for QFT: opportunities and risks

The Pacific

33. New Zealand shares strong cultural and familial links with the Pacific. Tokelau is part of the Realm and its people are New Zealand citizens. The largest Pacific ethnic group in New Zealand is from Samoa, a country with which we share a close partnership through the Treaty of Friendship. Expanding QFT to these and other low risk Pacific jurisdictions would facilitate social reconnection and family reunion that would be of high mutual benefit to New Zealand and the region.

34. Expanding QFT would also facilitate skilled worker and seasonal migration, which are important for Pacific remittances and New Zealand's economic recovery.

35. Re-opening borders with jurisdictions suffering significant economic stress due to a collapse in tourism would help stimulate their recovery, s6(a)

s9(2)(f)(iv)

36. s6(a), s9(2)(f)(iv)

37. s6(a), s9(2)(f)(iv)

38. s6(a)

Asia

39. s6(a)

s6(a)

s6(a), s9(2)(f)(iv)

Proactively Released

46. While there are potential opportunities to expand QFT to low risk Asian countries, the priority for the short term is embedding our QFT arrangements with Australia, the Cook Islands, ^{s9(2)(f)(iv)} Based on our understanding of your recent conversations with Cabinet colleagues, officials will continue to engage with other jurisdictions, ^{s6(a)}

^{56(a)} to explore how QFT could be progressed in the future, without commencing any formal discussions.

Information sharing and regional collaboration

47. In exploring QFT with other jurisdictions, New Zealand would benefit from taking an open approach to sharing information on our health and border settings in order to educate other countries and to potentially identify opportunities for collaboration, particularly with Australia. Pacific nations would benefit greatly from a detailed information sharing exercise, to provide a clearer sense of what is required by New Zealand for QFT (including bespoke arrangements of cohorts or one-way).

Next Steps

48. Subject to your agreement, officials will develop further advice on expanding one-way QFT from low risk Pacific Islands to New Zealand.
49. The Ministry of Health will continue to consider options for assessment of low risk jurisdictions and report back to you in due course.
50. Further advice on reopening the borders continues to be progressed through the Reconnecting New Zealanders strategy work programme, which will inform planning for future system capacity and capability requirements.

Consultation

51. The advice in this paper was developed in collaboration with the Ministries of Health, Foreign Affairs and Trade, Primary Industries, Transport, Business, Innovation and Employment, the New Zealand Customs Service and the Treasury.

Communications

52. Officials recommend that this paper is proactively released as part of a suite of papers relating to decisions to reopen the border after public announcements about the strategy for reconnecting New Zealand are made.