

Office of the Minister for COVID-19 Response

Cabinet

COVID-19 RESPONSE: 13 SEPTEMBER REVIEW OF ALERT LEVEL SETTINGS

Proposal

- 1 This paper seeks Cabinet's agreement to:
 - 1.1 either move Auckland to Alert Level 3 at 11.59pm Thursday 16 September 2021, or at 11.59pm Tuesday 21 September with a final check in at Cabinet on Monday 20 September; and
 - 1.2 keep the rest of New Zealand at Alert Level 2 until at least 11.59pm Tuesday 21 September, to be reviewed on Monday 20 September.
- 2 The paper also contains proposals for permitted movement across Alert Level boundaries and testing requirements.

Relation to government priorities

- 3 This paper concerns the Government's response to COVID-19.

Summary

- 4 As at 9am Monday 13 September, there have been 955 confirmed cases detected since 17 August 2021, of which 938 are in Auckland and 17 in Wellington. There were 33 new cases in the 24 hours to 9am Monday 13 September.
- 5 The Director-General of Health's interim advice notes that evidence suggests that the outbreak within Auckland is becoming contained to clearly identifiable communities, but there remains a risk of undetected cases.
- 6 Therefore, the Director-General's interim health advice is that Auckland could move to Alert Level 3 from 11:59pm Thursday 16 September with a public health risk assessment review on Sunday, 26 September. This advice recommends an additional two days are taken (beyond the previous end date of Tuesday 14 September) to ensure that results from recent testing confirms his assessment. He also recommends that the rest of New Zealand remain at Alert Level 2, with a public health review on Sunday 19 September with the potential to move to Alert Level 1 at a suitable subsequent date.
- 7 Assessment of the proposed options against the non-health factors indicate ongoing and increasing challenges related to financial support, economic, social and wellbeing impacts, and changing public attitudes of general fatigue, reinforcing the need to shift Auckland down Alert Levels as soon as it is safe to do so from a public health perspective.

- 8 The decision as to when we can safely move Auckland to Alert Level 3 that will be made in light of updated information provided orally by the Director-General. I consider our options are to move Auckland to Alert Level 3 at 11.59pm Thursday 16 September, or at 11.59pm Tuesday 21 September subject to a final check in with Cabinet on Monday 20 September. Irrespective of this decision, the rest of New Zealand should remain at Alert Level 2 until at least 11.59pm Tuesday 21 September.
- 9 A decision today to move to Alert Level 3 either later this week or next Tuesday would allow both further testing and case investigations to confirm the Director-General's assessment that the outbreak in Auckland is in fact becoming contained, and a signal that a move down is in sight. The alternative would be to remain at Alert Level 4 and review next Monday.
- 10 If Auckland moves to Alert Level 3, the Director-General recommends that in addition to the existing permissions for movement over the current Alert Level boundary we also allow travel to visit the dying; accompany a tūpāpaku or deceased person to a tangihanga or funeral; and attending a tangihanga or funeral. I consider that a narrow extension of permitted travel.
- 11 At a later date, Cabinet will be asked to consider whether, under an ongoing Alert Level 3/2 boundary, further permissions should be allowed to address personal circumstances that are causing undue hardship and to enable some workers in key industries to travel to limit impacts on major infrastructure projects and supply chains.
- 12 To mitigate the risk of travel across the current Alert Level 4/3 and a future Alert Level 3/2 boundary, I propose all people permitted to travel be required to carry evidence of having had a COVID-19 test. However, I do not support the Director-General's recommendation that people making a one-off trip (such as to attend a tangihanga or funeral) should be required to carry evidence of a negative test. In many cases it will not be practical to procure a test result for time critical travel and having different requirements will pose implementation and communication challenges.

How we make Alert Level decisions

- 13 Cabinet has previously agreed to use eight factors to guide decisions on the appropriate Alert Level settings for New Zealand [CAB-20-MIN-0199; CAB-20-MIN-0387 refer]. This includes the Director-General's assessment of a range of health factors; evidence of the measures' impact on society, at-risk populations, and public attitudes; and our ability to operationalise the restrictions.

Situation report

- 14 Following detection of a case of community transmission of COVID-19 on 17 August, Auckland is currently at Alert Level 4, and the rest of the country is currently at Alert Level 2.

- 15 As at 9am Monday 13 September, there have been 955 confirmed cases detected since 17 August 2021, of which 938 are in Auckland and 17 in Wellington. There were 33 new cases in the 24 hours to 9am Monday 13 September. A number of the new cases are part of known family groups and are not unexpected. More details about the recent positive cases will be provided verbally by the Director-General of Health at Cabinet today.
- 16 As set out in the Director-General of Health's interim health advice, evidence suggests that the outbreak within Auckland is becoming contained to clearly identifiable communities, but there remains a risk of undetected cases.
- 17 Although the proportion of cases that were infectious in the community has been decreasing, there have been recent exposure sites at healthcare facilities, as well as reports of bubble breaches. The recent events of the unlinked case who presented to Middlemore on Thursday 9 September and the Manurewa-Mangere Household Cluster represent high risk pockets in this outbreak. The unlinked cases from Mt Eden also suggest potential undiagnosed community transmission. The continued identification of cases in unknown contacts suggests that the edge of this cluster is not yet under control, however all other sub-clusters appear to be contained.

Updated modelling in relation to the current outbreak

- 18 Te Pūnaha Matatini (TPM) has continued to provide updated modelling results from its "branching process" and "contagion network" models. This now includes an estimation of the effective reproduction number (R_{eff}) during the period of Alert Level 4 restrictions.

Estimating the effective reproduction number and future case numbers

- 19 Using case data up to and including Monday 6 September, the central estimate for R_{eff} across the period from 23 August and 6 September was 0.36 (95% confidence interval (0.17, 0.54)). The modelling therefore projects a continuing reduction in case numbers and eventual return to elimination of COVID-19 in the community under Alert Level 4.
- 20 Over the past week, scenarios exploring a relaxation to Alert Level 3 have been modelled. These demonstrate that in some circumstances we could expect exponential growth in cases under Alert Level 3, but that this would require a significant (though not implausible) increase in R_{eff} (~4x increase) compared with Alert Level 4.
- 21 With the low number of daily new cases, stochastic (random/chance) events will now start to dominate in both models and real world. An individual case's circumstances (size of household, number of other close contacts, whether any are essential workers, distancing behaviour of those people, etc.) make a big difference to the transmission risks associated with the case. When case numbers are low, the outlook for the outbreak is increasingly dominated by these individual case circumstances: the "micro" matters related to each case

are more significant than the “macro” disease transmission parameters incorporated into the models, such as R_{eff} .

- 22 Additionally, in simulating Alert Level 3 scenarios, TPM’s network contagion model suggests that a modest increase in connectivity can create disproportionate relaxation in terms of the overall connectedness of the population (and therefore the potential for speed and breadth of transmission). Given the additional activity allowed under Alert Level 3, modelling results suggest a significant increase in infections arising from close community contacts (as opposed to within households or workplaces).
- 23 On this basis, officials advise that the modelled scenarios should be considered in conjunction with case-specific information. Under Alert Level 3, the higher R_{eff} scenarios (and the poorer simulated outcomes within these) are more likely to eventuate where the following conditions are true:
- 23.1 there remain a significant number of undetected cases in the community;
 - 23.2 new cases have periods where they are likely to be infectious in the community; and
 - 23.3 where new cases are infectious in the community, this occurs in higher-risk settings (i.e. close contacts or numerous, hard to trace, contacts).
- 24 Modelling results suggest that an earlier move to Alert Level 3 would likely make little difference to reported case numbers in the short-run (over the next 1-2 weeks) compared with scenarios where Alert Level 4 remains in place. In the downside scenarios for increased transmission under Alert Level 3, with R_{eff} greater than 1, there is a lag before these higher rates of transmission would materialise in higher daily reported cases. Emergent case-specific information should be used as an early indicator of which scenario is more likely.

Estimates of symptomatic testing rates

- 25 TPM continue to update their analysis of testing rates in comparison to the estimated symptomatic population. Testing levels are high in the Auckland DHBs and vary elsewhere. Overall, testing rates relative to the symptomatic population are generally higher than before this outbreak. Maintaining high testing levels remains important to detecting further clusters early.

Director-General of Health’s assessment against the health factors

Likelihood that the Auckland outbreak is contained

- 26 The Director-General is confident that the outbreak continues to be confined to Auckland. The only recent cases that occurred in Wellington were known household contacts who were in quarantine during their infectious period. The last time a case was infectious in the community in Wellington was on 20 August.

Update on unlinked cases and sub-clusters of concern

- 27 There continues to be several cases that have not been linked epi-linked. These cases can be separated into two groups:
- 27.1 True unlinked cases – these are linked genomically to the outbreak, but epi-links have not been found. Work continues to identify epi-links for these cases. In addition, regarding the Mt Eden cases reported in the last week, extensive testing has been undertaken in the suburb and greater Auckland CBD, with no positive results identified.
- 27.2 Initial unlinked cases who are later found to be contacts associated with known sub-clusters. These are of particular concern and recently have been found in unknown contacts linked to the Mangere-Manurewa sub-cluster and the AOG secondary transmission sub-cluster. At this point, it is unknown whether the numbers have peaked in these clusters and no clear epi-link has yet been established. Work is ongoing in establishing the relationship and building trust with this complex community so that all contacts are identified.
- 28 The largest sub-clusters are a cluster associated with the AOG Church in Mangere (375 confirmed cases), and community transmissions secondary to the AOG event (158 confirmed cases), and the Birkdale Social Network cluster associated with Case A (approximately 76 confirmed cases). All samples that have been sequenced to date are genomically linked and are due to the Delta variant.

Testing rates

- 29 Overall, testing rates have been very good across the Auckland region, particularly in the populations most impacted by the outbreak. In the rest of New Zealand, testing has been either stable or decreasing.
- 30 In the seven days to 1pm Sunday 12 September, 83,186 tests were completed. There were 8,657 tests across New Zealand in the 24 hours to 9am Monday 13 September. On Saturday 11 September 2021, 4,928 tests were processed in Auckland, excluding MIF guest and worker testing. The true number will be 400-500 higher based on registrations still to be processed. Tests in Auckland since Monday 6 September have been averaging 8,175 per day.
- 31 A testing and surveillance plan is being implemented to maintain high rates of testing, particularly across Auckland. It includes mini campaigns for asymptomatic testing within the community, as well as targeted essential businesses hosting one-off asymptomatic testing of staff.
- 32 Asymptomatic community testing in the Auckland region has increased, specifically in south and west Auckland, including Mangere, Manurewa, Otara, Papatoetoe, Henderson, and Massey. Since Monday 6 September, 14,000 people have been tested. From those tests, 27 cases have been identified. Of those, 24 have an identified epi-link to an existing case on investigation with

three remaining unlinked (but only identified in the past 24 hours). This targeted testing will continue over the next few weeks, particularly in affected communities. I have asked officials to explore standing up additional pop-up sites at local community centres (such as supermarkets) to support higher asymptomatic testing.

- 33 Surveillance testing of health care and emergency workers and workers who cross boundaries has also increased. Since Wednesday 1 September, over 13,000 such workers have been tested with no positive detections.
- 34 There remain no unexpected wastewater testing results. Samples from 155 sites, covering an estimated 3.8 million people have been analysed. There are 103 locations in the North Island and 52 locations in the South Island. As of Saturday 11 September:
- 34.1 there are no recent unexpected detections in wastewater collected outside the Auckland region;
 - 34.2 there have been three consecutive non-detections in Warkworth following several detections; and
 - 34.3 several sites in Auckland that recently had detections have had several consecutive non-detections.

Health system capacity including surveillance and contact tracing systems

- 35 As at 9am Sunday 12 September, there are 18 hospitalisations associated with the outbreak. Four of these are in ICU, and of those hospitalised, 14 are Pacific peoples. As at 11.59pm Friday 10 September, there are high levels of ventilator availability across all Auckland DHBs, which also have available beds in ICUs.
- 36 In terms of workforce impacts related to exposure incidents at Auckland hospitals, the Ministry of Health advise that there have been three main areas affected by exposure incidents at Counties Manukau District Health Board:
- 36.1 Out-patient clinic in early period of the current outbreak – 13 staff stood down.
 - 36.2 The general surgical ward saw 29 staff stood down, but none have to date returned any positive swabs; and
 - 36.3 Maternity ward in recent days, with “minimal” staff stood down.
- 37 Emergency Departments, the COVID wards and ICU have also had direct contact with COVID – however no PPE breaches have occurred, and to date, no staff have tested positive.
- 38 Services have been maintained at Middlemore despite the staff stand-downs. Clinics were greatly reduced as we entered L4 therefore the effects on outpatient services was minimal (but of course staff could not be re-deployed if they needed to self-isolate). Surgery at Middlemore was already functioning

in pods therefore whilst meaning a re-design of the roster, no clinical issues arose through the stand-down. Waitemata had to close its ED at North Shore for some days as around 100 staff were stood down but given this was right at the start of the current outbreak the “unknowns” were considerable so the reaction of the DHB was prudent.

- 39 As at 9am Sunday 12 September, there were 38,538 contacts identified in relation to the August community cases recorded in the National Contact Tracing Solution. 33,541 (87% of total) of these have been reached. Of the total number of contacts, 33,711 are close contacts, of which 91% have been reached. Most importantly, all very close contacts have been tested and, where relevant, remain in isolation.
- 40 There is a small number of outstanding contacts that the Ministry of Health have not been able to reach. In these situations they advise:
- 40.1 Contacts are called and texted daily for 18 days. For those for whom the Ministry of Health have an address, they ask the local Public Health Unit to door knock as well. Public health advice is that these cases can be closed down safely after 18 days since the virus is very unlikely to last longer than this.

Director-General's of Health's conclusions

- 41 Based on the most recent public health risk assessment completed on 12 September, the Director-General's interim health assessment is:
- 41.1 Auckland cases continue to trend downward over time;
- 41.2 there is no evidence to suggest there is undetected community transmission outside of Auckland, based on ongoing good rates of testing;
- 41.3 evidence suggests the outbreak within the Auckland region is becoming contained to clearly identifiable communities; and
- 41.4 the COVID-19 risk for Auckland is now considered medium and the rest of New Zealand remains low.
- 42 Based on this assessment the Director-General's interim public health advice is that:
- 42.1 Auckland move to Alert Level 3 from 11:59pm Thursday 16 September with a review in just under two weeks on Sunday 26 September;
- 42.2 the rest of New Zealand remain at Alert Level 2 with a review on Sunday 19 September with the potential to move to Alert Level 1 at a suitable subsequent date; and

- 42.3 Cabinet could agree to move the rest of the country to Alert Level 1, pending no escalation in Auckland's COVID-19 risk, when it meets on Monday 20 September.
- 43 The following measures will continue in Auckland to ensure that the risk of undetected transmission in affected communities is mitigated as much as possible:
- 43.1 ongoing significant community engagement with key leaders and agencies to increase access into and support of affected communities;
 - 43.2 a focus on surveillance testing to supplement the ongoing testing to identify any potential undetected cases; and
 - 43.3 maintaining the high rates of vaccination in Auckland, particularly in Māori and Pacific communities in South Auckland.

Proposal regarding Alert Levels

- 44 The decision as to when we can safely move Auckland to Alert Level 3 that will be made in light of updated information provided orally by the Director-General. Pending the most up to date advice on cases reported yesterday and today, I consider there could be a case for the shift down later than 11.59pm Thursday 16 September (as recommended by the Director-General).
- 45 This additional time could allow for testing results from between now and Monday to give us higher confidence that there is no undetected transmission beyond identifiable communities confirm that the outbreak in Auckland is in fact becoming contained.
- 46 I therefore propose Cabinet decide whether to move Auckland move to Alert Level 3 either at:
- 46.1 11.59pm Thursday 16 September; or
 - 46.2 11.59pm Tuesday 21 September, with a final check in at Cabinet on Monday 20 September.
- 47 Irrespective of this, the rest of New Zealand should remain at Alert Level 2 until at least 11.59pm Tuesday 21 September.

Assessment of the proposed measures/options against the non-health factors

- 48 I have assessed the options against the non-health factors agreed by Cabinet, as set out below. I consider that they support the discussion by Cabinet of options about the timing of any shift down by Auckland. I am particularly aware of the economic cost of Auckland remaining at Alert Level 4, the pressures on at-risk populations, the risk of diminishing social licence, and increasing mental health pressures. Those matters reinforce the need to shift Auckland down as soon as it is safe to do so but, on the other hand, could be

aggravated further should we have to move back up to Alert Level 4, should there be undetected transmission.

Economic impacts from Alert Levels

- 49 There is considerable uncertainty about the size of the impact of the Alert Level restrictions. Treasury undertook a full re-calibration of the impacts of the Alert Level restrictions in the BEFU forecasts in April 2021. These estimates have subsequently been updated to reflect changes to Alert Level 2 settings as well as the spill-over effects from Auckland being at Alert Level 4 while the rest of the country is at lower Alert Levels.¹

Approximate economic impacts of the Alert Level restrictions relative to Alert Level 1 (rounded to nearest \$10m)

Restrictions	Reduction in economic activity per week	
AL3 in Auckland, AL2 rest of country	\$260 million	4% of national GDP
AL4 in Auckland, AL2 rest of North Island, AL1 South Island	\$690 million	11% of national GDP
AL4 in Auckland, AL2 rest of country	\$700 million	12% of national GDP
AL4 across all of NZ	\$1,520 million	25% of national GDP

- 50 The impacts will differ across industries and within regions. Moving Auckland from Alert Level 4 to Alert Level 3 will enable a significant increase in activity across industries, with industries such as construction, wholesale trade and accommodation and food services expected to see the largest increases.

- 51 These estimates are derived from the observed impact previous Alert Level escalations have had on activity and they do not account for potential changes over time (such as firms adapting their behaviour). These estimates have been updated to account for:

51.1 Supply chain disruptions that may result from the Auckland region being in Alert Level 4 while other regions are at lower Alert Levels. The Treasury's initial assessment suggests this could increase the impact of COVID-19 restrictions by up to \$50 million per week given the importance of Auckland's manufacturing, warehousing & logistics sectors. As a result, Treasury has revised up its estimates of the weekly impact on economic activity of Auckland in Alert Level 4 and the rest of the country in Alert Level 2 (the current situation) to \$700m per week from \$650m.

51.2 Changes to Alert Level 2 settings (including the 50-person cap on indoor hospitality venues, and the 2-metre distancing requirement for indoor public venues). While these impacts are difficult to quantify,

¹ Some of these GDP losses will occur even without Alert Level restrictions, as people adjust their behaviour in response to perceived risk.

Treasury estimates the cost to be approximately \$10 million per week. Businesses experiencing significant pressures from the additional restrictions in Alert Level 2 can apply for the second payment under the Resurgence Support Payment (RSP) and potentially subsequent payments if the Alert Level 2 conditions remain in place for longer.

- 52 Businesses continue to express concerns regarding supply chain disruption and labour shortages. These issues are reportedly acute in construction and related sectors. Building materials shortages and price pressures in the industry are growing more acute owing to strong demand, global shipping issues, and Auckland's continued Alert Level 4 restrictions. Supply-side pressures were prevalent before the current outbreak (due to factors such as border settings) and will likely remain even as Alert Level settings are lowered.
- 53 Previous lockdowns indicate that while activity does fall sharply at higher Alert Levels, a significant amount is deferred rather than lost, if the time spent under higher Alert Level restrictions is kept short. Private sector forecasters also expect resilience. The major banks have reported far less concern from customers than last year, and bank economists expect that a short, sharp response will have a relatively small long-run impact on the economy.

Financial and in-kind support

- 54 The Ministry of Social Development (MSD), other social agencies and NEMA continue to monitor the social impacts of any change in Alert Levels, and any additional support that might be required for people and communities.
- 55 The Wage Subsidy Scheme August 2021 has had strong uptake with \$1,689.297 million paid across two payments as at Thursday 9 September, supporting 1,078,116 jobs. The vast majority of jobs supported have been for businesses with under 500 employees. The August 2021 Resurgence Support Payment Scheme has had strong uptake as well, with \$512.54 million paid to 166,220 businesses as of 9 September. The vast majority of support (92% of recipients) has been for businesses with less than 10 employees.
- 56 The number of people on a main benefit increased by 9,450 in the three weeks to Friday 3 September and further increases are likely. Food grants also increased significantly, up 62% over the three weeks to 3 September, compared to the week before lockdown. The rise in food grants was initially faster than that seen following the shift to Alert Level 4 in March 2020 but has fallen back in the last week.
- 57 Any move down Alert Levels in parts of the country that enable more economic activity should reduce demand for financial and in-kind support. However, the proposals in this paper will result in continued and possibly increased demand from some sectors in Auckland.

Impacts on at-risk populations

- 58 The outbreak of COVID-19 and the associated Alert Level response is having a range of impacts on at-risk populations. These are set out in more detail in Appendix 1, and include:
- 58.1 higher vulnerability to, and disproportionate impacts of, COVID-19 amongst Māori and Pacific populations, exacerbated by lower rates of vaccination and existing health co-morbidities amongst these groups;
 - 58.2 restrictions on earning capacity (e.g. loss of jobs, reduced hours, small businesses affected and the impact of finances of families) and issues accessing support for those still working at Alert Level 4 (including childcare arrangements, and support to adhere with public health advice and get vaccinated); and
 - 58.3 inequitable access to material essentials such as food, hygiene products, shelter and warmth, and online financial services, and issues with vaccination and testing stations requiring a booking.
- 59 Particular themes reported from agencies across the previous week and associated with the acute impacts of this current outbreak include:
- 59.1 increasing challenges associated with education – digital connectedness and accessing school resources, mixed levels of engagement with distance learning, and deepening concerns about return to school hesitancy and participation levels when they can return to onsite learning;
 - 59.2 increases in discrimination targeted towards Pacific peoples and disabled people (related to face-covering exemptions); and
 - 59.3 ongoing demand for mental health support services, with increased support being sought in relation to people's mental health and general wellbeing, and issues related to anxiety.
- 60 MSD, NEMA and social service providers will continue to work with communities and provide consistent messaging about the supports already in place and how to utilise existing support channels. If Auckland stays at Alert Level 4, these issues are likely to be exacerbated, whereas a move to Alert Level 3 might generate some improvements, particularly in relation to mental health issues.

Public attitudes and compliance

- 61 Research undertaken between Tuesday 31 August and Sunday 5 September (focused on Pacific, Māori, Asian and South East Asian communities) showed broad public support for the current measures and reflected little change from the previous week. There is a similar sense of growing adaption among families to alert level restrictions.

- 62 Most New Zealanders remain “happy” to do their part when it comes to the current Alert Level restrictions and guidelines, with this emotional acceptance shaped strongly by the spread of Delta in Australia. Numbers of people scanning in with the COVID-19 Tracer app have seen a significant increase with 2.6 million scans in the 24 hours to midday Saturday 11 September. A combination of greater perceived risk (i.e. the current outbreak) combined with new mandatory record keeping requirements is likely to be motivating increased record keeping behaviours.
- 63 However, there is a growing sense of fatigue generally, and specifically about keeping up with the ongoing COVID-19 situation and relevant information for the public, e.g. regarding locations of interest. There has also been growing concern about what the future brings economically, socially and health wise.
- 64 Social listening reports undertaken on Wednesday 8 September show a decrease in neutral sentiment shifting towards negative conversation. Key categories that show these changes are related to the Economy and Mental Health with 6% and Financial Stability with 7%. Business sentiment analysis has found that with the lengthening of the lockdown period, many small business owners are feeling anxious, as they are having to factor in the compounding impact of a lack of skilled staff.
- 65 Since the change to Alert Level 3 in areas south of Auckland, infringements, prosecutions, and warnings related to COVID-19 have mostly decreased. In Auckland, infringement rates appear steady under Alert Level 4. At 5pm Saturday 11 September, Police had received 7,530 online breach notifications for Tāmaki Makaurau through its 105 system. Overall, Police have undertaken 22,541 COVID-19 related activities and have issued 1,545 infringements in Tāmaki Makaurau.
- 66 Overall, Police is seeing very high levels of compliance with the COVID Alert Level rules. However, recent Police reporting identify some issues including:
- 66.1 growing protest activity, including plans for a nationwide protest due to take place during October. Social media scanning demonstrates growing interest in the protest and Police will continue to monitor online activity;
 - 66.2 continued incidents of aggression and non-compliance with restrictions (particularly in relation to the wearing of face coverings) at public places like bus interchanges and supermarkets;
 - 66.3 small numbers of people attempting to cross Alert Level boundaries when not permitted; and
 - 66.4 lockdown measures continuing to exacerbate issues for those experiencing mental health challenges, family harm and substance abuse, with levels of reporting consistent with what Police have seen throughout the course of this outbreak.

- 67 Public attitudes and compliance are reflecting growing trends of anxiety and general fatigue. It is possible these issues will continue to grow the longer Auckland stays at Alert Level 4. A move to Alert Level 3 might improve outcomes, particularly as to mental health. This reporting serves to reinforce the need to shift Auckland down Alert Levels as soon as it is safe to do so, from a public health perspective.

Ability to operationalise the proposals in this paper

- 68 I am not proposing any changes to Alert Level settings in this paper. The operational issues therefore relate to implementation of a 3/2 boundary and are set out in the following section.

Alert Level Boundaries

Update on current boundaries

- 69 On Monday 6 September Cabinet agreed that the same categories of permitted movement for businesses and services across the previous Alert Level 4/3 boundary would also apply to the Alert Level 4/2 boundary [CAB-21-MIN-0360 refers]. In addition, there is a limited number of permissions for individuals to cross the boundary for non-work purposes, e.g. to provide urgent care for a child or attend a medical appointment.
- 70 Between 11.59pm Wednesday 1 September and 11.59pm Thursday 9 September a total of 105,352 vehicles had been stopped at the northern and southern checkpoints, with 1,402 turned around. Of this number, as at 11.59pm, Thursday 9 September,² 554 vehicles had attempted to travel through a checkpoint since the Alert Level 4/2 boundary was established at 11.5pm Tuesday 7 September and were stopped by Police.
- 71 Generally, compliance has been very high and motorists are carrying the required evidence to demonstrate their permitted reason to travel. Only around 1% of vehicles have been turned around.
- 72 On Friday 10 September, Air New Zealand carried 187 passengers out of, and 206 passengers into, Auckland. The average daily passenger volumes under the current Alert level 4/2 settings are 221 arriving and 229 leaving Auckland.
- 73 As at 12pm Friday 10 September, 6,035 companies had been issued Business Travel Documents that can be used as evidence of a worker's permission to cross an Alert Level boundary. These support 37,650 people to cross the Alert Level 4/2 boundary. Transport (12,634 workers) and the primary sector (8,277 workers) currently account for most documents.
- 74 As at 12.30pm Saturday 11 September, the Ministry of Health had received 3,154 requests for an exemption to cross the Alert Level 4/2 boundary. To date, 2,287 requests have been declined and 144 exemptions have been

² Due to the availability of data, checkpoint reporting is next available at 12pm Monday 13 September.

approved. Other requests are either waiting for approval from the Director-General or are invalid as the reason for travel is permitted under the Order.

The public health risk of travel across an Alert Level 3/2 boundary is less than across the Alert Level 4/2 boundary

- 75 Under our risk assessments, at Alert Level 3 there is a medium risk of community transmission. This may mean that there are active, but managed, clusters. Consequently, Alert Level 3 restrictions are much closer to Alert Level 4 restrictions than those at Alert Level 2. This reflects the risk there may be undetected chains of transmission or that one or more clusters may break containment.
- 76 The Director-General of Health's view is that permitted movement should remain limited at this point as there remains a medium risk of community transmission of COVID-19 at Alert Level 3, and an ongoing need to mitigate that risk.
- 77 The Director-General of Health also recommends that surveillance testing of workers crossing an Alert Level 3/2 boundary continues – this is considered in more detail below.

There are options for permissions across an Alert Level 3/2 boundary

- 78 Officials have identified two options for movement across an Alert Level 3/2 boundary, which could be phased in over the course of time that Auckland is in Alert Level 3.
- 79 Initially, under an Alert Level 3/2 boundary, officials recommend, in line with the Director General's advice, a slight expansion to the Alert Level 4/2 permissions in the current Order. This expansion would allow additional permissions for people visiting the dying, attending funerals and tangihanga, and accompanying a tūpāpaku or a deceased person.
- 80 This extension would see the number of individuals crossing the border remain relatively consistent, and therefore carries the lowest level of public health risk. It would be clear, consistent and easy to enforce as those crossing the boundary would be familiar with existing requirements. Diminishing social licence (from both businesses and individuals) due to a longer lockdown may mean that more attempts to cross the border may be made. However, with increased spot checks at the boundary to support surveillance testing, it is likely that more people would be turned around before crossing into areas with lower Alert Levels.
- 81 Expanding permissions to enable people to attend funerals and tangihanga recognises the social and cultural importance of people being able to care for their loved ones, and to grieve. We know that people particularly struggle with the Alert Level restrictions where they are concerned about their whānau and family's wellbeing and when they are in grief. This decision is important to maintain social licence and to encourage compliance.

At a later point the 3/2 boundary permissions could be extended

- 82 After some time at Alert Level 3, once the extant risk of transmission is better understood, Cabinet could consider broadening permitted movements. This would see, in addition to the permissions outlined above, permitted travel for business and services and some additional personal movements.
- 83 Indicatively, officials foresee the below as an option for Cabinet to consider at a later date:

Businesses and Services

- 83.1 Building, construction, and maintenance services required for key infrastructure, including key utilities, infrastructure that enables or supports supply chains that are needed for other road and rail networks, and other infrastructure whose operations, if interrupted, would be seriously impacted.
- 83.2 Forestry and wood product processing for which the travel between alert level areas is reasonably necessary to enable the service to be provided and that the provision of the service cannot reasonably be delayed without substantial implications for the supply chain.

Non-work purposes

- 83.3 Going to the person's principal home or place of residence (including from an Alert Level 3 to an Alert Level 2 area).
- 83.4 Going to, or returning from, the home or place of residence of a shared caregiver (including the shared caregiver or fellow resident required to accompany the child for this purpose).
- 83.5 Relocating a home or place of residence, or business premises on a permanent or long-term basis.
- 84 Analysis of these broader proposals will be provided to Cabinet on Monday 20 September.

Surveillance testing at the Alert Level boundary can be expanded as an additional layer of protection

- 85 On Monday 6 September Cabinet agreed to introduce a requirement for workers of Alert Level 4 businesses and services (and any workers doing necessary work at any premises) to be required to carry evidence of a COVID-19 test within the last seven days when crossing an Alert Level boundary [CAB-21-MIN-0360 refers].
- 86 The requirement for workers to carry evidence commences from 11:59pm Thursday 16 September. We do not therefore have evidence of the impact of this requirement on traffic flows. Police planning for this change is well advanced. Checking light vehicles will follow current practice with vehicles

being asked to show evidence of authorisation to travel and of evidence of testing within the last seven days.

- 87 Stopping every heavy vehicle to check for evidence would create considerable delays and rapidly impact on supply chains. Police therefore intend to randomly select around 10% of heavy vehicles to be signalled to come out of the freight priority lane to be checked for evidence of testing. This proportion should be sufficient to deter non-compliance, whilst allowing most heavy vehicles to pass through without undue delay. I note, however, that allowing more travel across the boundary and extending testing requirements will cause more delays at checkpoints.

The Director-General of Health recommends all people permitted to cross Alert Level boundary for personal reasons be required to carry evidence of a test

- 88 The Director-General of Health recommends that people permitted to cross Alert Level boundaries for personal reasons be required to carry evidence of having been tested for COVID-19 within the last seven days. However, where the travel is of a one-off nature such as attending a tangihanga or funeral, he proposes they be required to carry evidence of a negative result in the previous 72 hours, not just evidence of having had a test. He does not recommend that the requirement should apply if the travel is due to an emergency, urgent care of children and others, or going home after isolation of quarantine.
- 89 On 6 September Cabinet agreed that those travelling into or out of an Alert Level 4 area for permitted personal reasons should be encouraged to carry evidence of a COVID-19 test within the last seven days before crossing an Alert Level boundary. The Director-General's proposal would impose a legal requirement that evidence must be carried, rather than being encouraged to do so.
- 90 Requiring people to carry evidence of having been tested before moving for personal reasons will mitigate the risk associated with these movements. As with permitted workers, it will enable the early identification of a COVID-19 case in asymptomatic individuals. This may become more frequent as the vaccine roll-out reduces the impact of COVID-19 on some people who are vaccinated, increasing the likelihood of asymptomatic infection. The earlier that community cases are identified, the greater chance we have of limiting community transmission and another outbreak.
- 91 People will be required to carry evidence of having been tested within the past seven days where the movement is regular, such as taking care of pets or other animals, and the evidential requirement will act as a surveillance testing regime. The Director-General proposes that their regime is like the worker regime, and they are not required to carry evidence of a negative test before travelling.
- 92 In other cases, a movement will be a single movement, such as where a person is accompanying a tūpāpaku or a deceased person to a tangihanga or funeral. They will likely only need to be tested once and the Director-General

considered that they should be required to carry evidence of having returned a negative test within the 72 hours prior to their intended movement. In these cases, the Director-General considers that a testing requirement is a useful public health tool and will not place an onerous obligation on the individual.

- 93 It is proposed that individuals travelling for emergencies, for urgent care of children and others if no other appropriate person is available, and those going home after isolation or quarantine are exempt from being required to carry evidence of having undertaken a COVID-19 test within seven days of travel.
- 94 Evidence of having undertaken a test would also not be required for individuals transiting through Alert Level 3 to journey to or from Northland for permitted reasons (including by air transit).
- 95 If Cabinet agrees to implement testing for individuals undertaking permitted movements, the Ministry of Health consider that this requirement can be enabled within 72 hours of announcement. This requirement could therefore come into force with the change of Alert Levels at 11:59pm Thursday 16 September.

Risks of added complexity

- 96 The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet notes that it is desirable to have a consistent requirement for all people crossing boundaries, in order to ensure the public receive clear and consistent information, and to allow for efficient enforcement of the rules by Police. Having a higher standard of evidence for certain groups of people risks confusing both people travelling and those enforcing boundaries.
- 97 Police consider that the changes proposed in this paper will, cumulatively, make checking at the boundary more difficult, slower and less reliable and will create delays in crossing boundaries. This is due to an increase in the number of permitted movements (creating higher traffic flow) and an increase in the categories of authority to be checked and the variability of types of evidence. The latter will increase the time taken to check each vehicle, particularly if there are different requirements for different types of personal movements. Delays can clearly reduce public satisfaction, trust and confidence, and ultimately impact on social licence and the efficiency of essential services and supply chains.
- 98 To mitigate these risks, an alternative approach would be to require all people crossing boundaries for personal travel to carry evidence of having undertaken a COVID-19 test within the seven days prior to travel, but not necessarily show a negative result.

Capacity and capability to deliver additional surveillance testing

- 99 The ability for testing to be undertaken in a timely and efficient manner is crucial to enabling a surveillance testing regime.

- 100 The Ministry of Health are confident that they have in place the necessary testing capacity to accommodate the current level of testing required, including the additional lift in surveillance testing across several workforce cohorts. The testing capacity across the network is continuing to grow.
- 101 Evidence can be either a text message from the test provider or a paper record. I understand most providers can issue confirmation texts of a test having been taken.

Further work is underway on future Alert Level scenarios

- 102 Work is underway on reviewing Alert Level 1 settings in light of the Delta variant. I have received preliminary advice from the Director-General. This identifies the highest risk as being large indoor gatherings where eating, drinking, singing, dancing and mingling are involved, which could result in an undetected super-spreader event.
- 103 I am expecting further advice this week on potential changes to Alert Level 1 settings which I will bring to the COVID-19 Ministers Group meeting on Tuesday 14 September for consideration, and to Cabinet for final decisions on Monday 20 September.

Financial implications

- 104 On 18 August 2021, Delegated Ministers agreed to activate both the Resurgence Support Payment (RSPAUG21) and Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSSAUG21). The tables below provide a high-level estimate for the costs of the schemes under Alert Level scenarios.

Approximate WSS and RSP costs in different Alert Level scenarios

Scenario	WSS	RSP ³	Total
AL4 in Auckland, AL3 across rest of NZ – 2 weeks	\$700 to \$1,050 million	\$550 million	\$1,250 to \$1,600 million
AL4 in Auckland, AL2 across rest of NZ – 2 weeks	\$500 to \$800 million	\$430 million	\$930 to \$1,230 million
AL3 in Auckland, AL2 across rest of NZ – 2 weeks	\$350 to \$650 million	\$200 million	\$550 to \$850 million

³ Officials expect most of the RSP's uptake to be realised in the first 10 days of a lockdown. Any lockdown of 10 or more days is therefore likely to have costs at the higher end of our estimates.

WSSAUG21 and RSPAUG21 actual payments made and appropriation balances

	WSSAUG21	RSPAUG21
Payments made at 10 September ⁴	\$1,793 million ⁵	\$523 million
Amount remaining in appropriations at 10 September ⁶	\$779 million	\$607 million ⁷

Wage Subsidy Scheme August 2021

- 105 Applications for the first payment under the WSSAUG21 have closed.
- 106 The second payment for the WSSAUG21 opened at 9am Friday 3 September and will close at 11:59pm Thursday 16 September [CAB-21-MIN-0346 refers]. The cost of the second payment is expected to be less than the first payment as a result of the change in Alert Levels (see the first scenario in the cost table above).
- 107 If Auckland is at Alert Level 3 or above at 11:59pm Friday 17 September as seems likely given the proposals in this paper, a third payment under the WSSAUG21 will be triggered. The third payment will open at 9am Friday 17 September and close at 11:59pm Thursday 30 September. Costs will depend on the Alert Level settings in place.
- 108 Cabinet has delegated authority to Joint Ministers to draw down up to \$2,200 million from the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (CRRF) for future payments under the WSSAUG21 [CAB-21-MIN-0328 refers]. As at Friday 10 September, the balance of the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund is \$1.8 billion.

Resurgence Support Payment August 2021

- 109 Under initial alert level scenarios and associated estimated uptake, the RSPAUG21 was estimated to cost \$600 million, though officials recognised that a more severe public health situation requiring prolonged periods at higher Alert Levels would push costs beyond that figure.
- 110 On Friday 27 August Cabinet agreed to increase the funding available under the RSPAUG21 by \$300 million [CAB-21-MIN-0344 refers], raising the total value appropriated to \$899.9 million. Cabinet also authorised Joint Ministers to draw down on the CRRF if costs escalate beyond estimates again, up to a cap of \$100 million.
- 111 Following the Government's announcement of a second payment of the RSP, a further \$230 million was appropriated to meet the expected cost (included in

⁴ Note the \$1,793 million represents actual payments made. It does not represent the value of actual applications made due to the lag in processing time.

⁵ This total includes amounts for the first and second payments from the WSSAUG21.

⁶ Delegated Ministers have agreed to draw down an additional \$500 million from the CRRF to the WSSAUG21 to cover the costs of the additional wage subsidy payments.

⁷ This figure includes a further \$230 million that was appropriated to meet the expected cost of the second payment of the RSP.

the table above). The Government also announced that if Alert Level 2 settings are still in place in the coming weeks, there will be two further rounds of the RSP, opening on Friday 8 October and Friday 29 October. The cost of these rounds will be determined by the Alert Level settings in place at the time of their respective openings.

Legislative Implications

- 112 I will make an Order under section 11 of the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 informed by Cabinet’s decision.
- 113 Before making a replacement Order or amending an Order, I must have regard to any advice from the Director-General about the risks of the outbreak or spread of COVID-19, and the nature and extent of any measures that are appropriate to address those risks. I may also have regard to Cabinet’s decision on the level of public health measures appropriate to respond to those risks and avoid, mitigate, or remedy the effects of the outbreak or spread of COVID-19.
- 114 Ministerial consultation requirements will be satisfied through previous consultation on template Orders for Alert Level requirements and the proposals outlined in this paper.
- 115 The Act requires that there be 48 hours between publishing the Order and its coming into force. However, this requirement does not apply where I am satisfied that the Order should come into force urgently to prevent or contain the outbreak or spread of COVID-19, or when the effect of the order is only to remove or reduce requirements imposed by a COVID-19 order. For the proposals in this paper, I am satisfied that both circumstances would apply.

Impact Analysis

- 116 The Treasury has determined that the regulatory proposals in this paper are exempt from the requirement to provide a Regulatory Impact Statement because they are intended to alleviate the short-term impacts of a declared emergency event of COVID-19 outbreak. These proposals are required urgently to be effective, making a complete, robust and timely impact analysis unfeasible.

Human Rights

- 117 s9(2)(h) [Redacted text block]

s9(2)(h) [Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Proactively Released

s9(2)(h)

Population impacts

128 The impacts of community outbreaks of COVID-19 (and the associated Alert Level measures put in place) on vulnerable populations has been canvassed earlier in this paper and are outlined in more detail in Appendix 1.

Consultation

129 This paper was prepared by the COVID-19 Group within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The Ministry of Health reviewed the paper and provided specific input and text, including advice on the course of the outbreak, the public health response, and the views and recommendations of the Director-General of Health. The Crown Law Office advised on Bill of Rights Act implications.

130 The Treasury, Te Puni Kōkiri, the Ministry of Social Development, Ministry for Ethnic Communities, and Ministry for Pacific Peoples have provided input into relevant parts of the paper. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, Department of Internal Affairs, Waka Kotahi, Ministry of Transport, Ministry for Primary Industries, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Education, and Police were consulted on relevant parts of this paper.

Communications and proactive release

131 The Prime Minister will communicate the decisions set out in this paper after Cabinet agreement. I intend to proactively release this paper after Cabinet consideration subject to redaction as appropriate under the Official Information Act 1982.

Recommendations

The Minister for COVID-19 Response recommends that Cabinet:

- 1 note that since 17 August 2021, 955 community cases of COVID-19 have been identified in New Zealand (as of 9am Monday 13 September);
- 2 note that on Monday 6 September, Cabinet agreed to keep Auckland at Alert Level 4 until at least 11.59pm Tuesday 14 September; agreed to shift the rest of New Zealand to Alert Level 2, from 11.59pm Tuesday 7 September; and

agreed to review these settings on Monday, 13 September [CAB-21-MIN-0360 refers];

- 3 note the Director-General of Health's interim public health advice is:
 - 3.1 Auckland cases continue to trend downward over time;
 - 3.2 there is no evidence to suggest there is undetected community transmission outside of Auckland, based on ongoing good rates of testing;
 - 3.3 evidence suggests the outbreak within the Auckland region is becoming contained to clearly identifiable communities; and
 - 3.4 the COVID-19 risk for Auckland is now considered medium and the rest of New Zealand remains low;

Alert Levels

- 4 note the Director-General of Health's interim public health advice is that:
 - 4.1 Auckland move to Alert Level 3 at 11.59pm on Thursday 16 September with a review on 28 September;
 - 4.2 the rest of New Zealand remain at Alert Level 2 with a review on 19 September with the potential to move to Alert Level 1 at a suitable subsequent date; and
 - 4.3 Cabinet could agree to move the rest of the country to Alert Level 1, providing there is no escalation in Auckland's COVID-19 risk, when it meets on 20 September;
- 5 agree an appropriate measure in response to the level of public health risk would be to:

EITHER

 - 5.1 move Auckland to Alert Level 3 from 11:59pm Thursday 16 September;

OR

 - 5.2 move Auckland to Alert Level 3 from 11.59pm Tuesday 21 September (subject to a final check in at Cabinet on Monday 20 September);

AND

 - 5.3 keep the rest of New Zealand remain at Alert Level 2 until at least 11.59pm Tuesday 21 September;
- 6 agree Cabinet next reviews Alert Level settings for Auckland and the rest of New Zealand on Monday 20 September;

Alert Level boundaries

- 7 note Cabinet has previously agreed to permissions for movement across the Alert Level 4/2 boundary for work and non-work purposes [CAB-21-MIN-0360 refers];
- 8 note the Director-General's advice is that there remains a need to ensure permitted movement across an Alert Level 3/2 boundary is very limited because at Alert Level 3 there remains a medium risk of community transmission of COVID-19;
- 9 agree to the permitted movement across an Alert Level 3/2 boundary being the existing Alert Level 4/2 permissions in the current Order (including permitted movement for businesses and services and non-work purposes) and the following additional personal categories:
 - 9.1 to visit the dying;
 - 9.2 accompany a tūpāpaku or deceased person to a tangihanga or funeral; and
 - 9.3 attending a tangihanga or funeral;
- 10 note that following Auckland moving to Alert Level 3, I will ask Cabinet to consider whether further permissions for travel across the Alert Level 3/2 should be allowed to address personal circumstances that are causing undue hardship and to enable some workers in key industries to travel to limit impacts on major infrastructure projects and supply chains;
- 11 note that on Monday 6 September Cabinet agreed both that workers at Alert Level 4 businesses and services (and any workers doing necessary work at any premises) be required to carry evidence of a COVID-19 test within the last seven days when crossing an Alert Level boundary, and that people permitted to travel for personal reasons be encouraged to have a test [CAB-21-MIN-0360 refers];
- 12 agree to retain the Alert Level 4/2 testing requirements for permitted work travel under an Alert Level 3/2 boundary; and
- 13 agree that people who move across an Alert Level 4/2 or Alert Level 3/2 boundary for:

EITHER

 - 13.1 personal reasons on a regular basis be required to carry evidence of having had a COVID-19 test within seven days of crossing the boundary; and
 - 13.2 personal reasons that undertake a single trip be required to carry evidence of a negative COVID-19 test received within 72 hours of crossing the boundary;

[Director-General of Health's preferred option]

OR

- 13.3 personal reasons be required to carry evidence of having had a COVID-19 test within seven days of crossing the boundary;

[Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's preferred option]

- 14 agree that people who move across an Alert Level 4/2 or Alert Level 3/2 boundary due to an emergency, to provide urgent care for a child or care or support to a person in a critical or terminal condition if no other appropriate person is able, or are going home after isolation or quarantine, are exempt from the testing requirement in recommendation 13;
- 15 agree that individuals permitted to transit through an Alert Level 3 or Alert Level 4 area by air or road are exempt from the testing requirement in recommendation 13;

Other matters

- 16 agree that Cabinet's decision today will be communicated by the Prime Minister.

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

Appendix 1 – Impacts on at-risk populations

Māori

1. At an overall population level, whānau Māori experience the impacts of ongoing lockdowns disproportionately and are more vulnerable to COVID-19 due to higher rates of health co-morbidities and other health disparities, including mental health. Te Puni Kōkiri regional offices continue to report increased mental health concerns and anxiety, increased family violence, and alcohol and drug addiction issues compared to the lockdowns in 2020.
2. The move to Alert Level 2 and the additional funding provided to Māori providers, Whānau Ora Commissioning Agencies, hapū and iwi, is likely to reduce the stress and anxiety within Māori communities caused by uncertainty, lack of accessibility/affordability of food⁸ and other essentials, reduced income (including almost 1,500 more Māori receiving Jobseeker Work Ready support in August compared to July) and increasing food prices. Maintaining access to essential services and other supports for whānau in Tāmaki Makaurau, including psychosocial supports and culturally-based services, will remain critical to ensuring the ability for whānau to recover during the post lockdown period.
3. For example, lack of access to connectivity and digital devices for school children in Tāmaki Makaurau may become even more severe with ongoing Alert levels 3 and 4. We are aware that some iwi and hapū are working to address this issue, which is particularly important because of the high proportion of school age Māori residing in Tāmaki Makaurau. Attention will need to be given to students accessing Alternative Education, where we have received reports of ongoing difficulties accessing learning resources. Issues of return to school and hesitancy because of fear of infection to tamariki and their whānau may become an issue.
4. Continued Alert Level 4 restrictions in Tāmaki Makaurau also adversely affects its Māori businesses, including sole traders, diminishing their resiliency and recovery capabilities. Muted business signals, lack of interruption insurance, supply chain issues and growing inflation are decreasing Māori businesses' financial reserves and recovery capabilities. Construction workers seeking guaranteed work in nearby Alert Level 2 zones are also predicted to adversely affect Tāmaki Makaurau's future recovery capabilities.
5. For the rest of Aotearoa under Alert Level 2, some Māori businesses are struggling to transition to digital channels. Ongoing concerns around viability of Māori tourism and hospitality businesses, urge consideration of revised and focussed supports.
6. Despite a considerable increase in total doses administered per 1,000 people in the last 2 weeks for all ethnicities, Māori vaccination rates are still trailing

⁸ Numbers of special needs grants for food (numbers of grants not people receiving grants) in August by ethnicity showed 71,300 for Māori, 37,800 for NZ European and 13,500 for Pacific peoples. In the last month there has been a 38 percent (19,800) increase in SNG's for food for Māori compared to 34 percent (3,400) for Pacific peoples.

behind, possibly due, in part, to the age-based rollout (yet to be substantiated). As 7 September 2021, 245,038 Māori have had their first vaccination and 120,832 their second. Of concern, Māori aged 20 to 34 are being vaccinated at almost half the rate of non-Māori in Tāmaki Makaurau.⁹ Government and Māori communities are adopting a variety of local initiatives to improve vaccination rates, including social media strategies to address vaccine hesitancy amongst rangatahi.¹⁰

Vaccination Rates for people under 60 years – as at 7 September 2021

	Māori	
	1st dose	2nd dose
Under 60	37%	14%
12-15	26%	0%
16-19	29%	6%
20-24	27%	9%
25-29	26%	9%
30-34	30%	10%
35-39	36%	13%
40-44	44%	17%
45-49	50%	22%
50-54	59%	30%
55-59	65%	41%

	Non-Māori	
	1st dose	2nd dose
Under 60	59%	22%
12-15	44%	0%
16-19	50%	9%
20-24	48%	16%
25-29	49%	19%
30-34	56%	21%
35-39	59%	22%
40-44	64%	24%
45-49	64%	26%
50-54	73%	32%
55-59	75%	40%

Pacific peoples

17 A significant proportion of the Pacific population living in New Zealand live in the Auckland region. The current outbreak and associated higher Alert Levels is impacting the Pacific population in the following ways:

- 17.1 Pacific peoples account for over 70% of the current Covid-19 cases, with the Māngere Assembly of God Church (AOG) of Samoa presenting as the largest sub-cluster of this outbreak.
- 17.2 Higher Alert Level settings are creating restrictions on earning capacity which can amplify income and poverty inequities. Food security and financial struggles continue to be key issues. There is ongoing significant demand for food parcels and social services, and other essentials e.g. PPE.
- 17.3 School principals have raised concerns about ‘COVID fatigue’ and the potential impact on NCEA exams. Overall, there is concern that long lockdowns could disadvantage students in assessments and

⁹ Since 18 August, the average daily doses administered to Māori has more than doubled from 3,100 to 6,500 per day. In the week to 5 September, the average daily doses administered to Māori was 7,100.

¹⁰ In Gisborne and Hawke’s Bay where vaccine rates are beginning to drop behind the national levels, Māori Health Providers are working outside the booking process and targeting specific communities with low vaccine uptake.

exacerbate wellbeing issues. Some needs are still not being met, e.g. students and churches without devices.

- 17.4 Nationally, the impact of the lockdown on RSE workers and overstayers is a growing concern. Cook Islanders unable to get home due to closed borders are being supported by New Zealand-based community because they are ineligible for support.
 - 17.5 There has been an increase in racial discrimination targeted towards Pacific peoples which is linked to the large outbreak among the Pacific community in South Auckland.
 - 17.6 Pacific people currently have relatively low vaccination rates and there are reports of vaccine hesitancy, particularly among young people. This is driven by misinformation, religious beliefs, concerns about the recent myocarditis case, and prevalent low health literacy.
 - 17.7 There are self-isolation challenges for larger intergenerational families, and cultural capability gaps identified in MIQ settings. Other challenges reported include meeting the criteria to access support (e.g. food parcels, financial support), and issues with vaccination and testing stations requiring a booking.
 - 17.8 A need for support for elderly and people living alone (to prevent against abuses) has also been identified, alongside health and wellbeing impacts and family violence concerns, all of which relate to confinement to the home bubble under higher alert levels and the stress of reduced or no income.
- 18 Church leaders, Pacific providers, community navigators, and the Ministry for Pacific Peoples continue to be critical sources of trusted information from government into the community about keeping safe from COVID-19, and the importance of getting vaccinated. These trusted sources have also mobilised to deliver support for Pacific families and communities alongside pop-up drives to increase both vaccination and COVID-19 testing rates. Some community leaders have also expressed a desire to be supported to be prepared for future lockdowns.

Disabled people

- 19 The current priority issue, while higher Alert Level restrictions are in place, is the issue of face-covering exemptions. There remains a number of documented incidents of confrontation between disabled people who are unable to use face coverings, and supermarket staff, security guards and sometimes Police. This issue is being responded to through better communications and information with a commitment to monitoring and follow up actions. The Ministry of Health is taking the lead alongside the Office for Disability Issues, DPMC, MSD, Police, supermarket chains and disabled peoples organisations. The key messages being promoted are:

- 19.1 For disabled people and the disability community - “the use of face covering/face masks is an important public health measure to combat COVID. Some, not all disabled people, and people with mental health and other health conditions may have difficulty using a face covering. That’s okay! The right to not use a face covering also brings the responsibility to be especially vigilant on social distancing when in public and/or accessing services.”
- 19.2 For the wider community - “some disabled people and some people with mental health and/or other health conditions are unable to use face coverings. That’s okay, respect, don’t judge. Those who are unable to use face coverings should, with care, be able to access supermarkets, and other services.”

Ethnic communities

- 20 As with previous lockdowns, there continue to be concerns around the loss of jobs, reduced hours, and the financial impact on families for our ethnic communities. Challenges associated with digital connectedness and a limited understanding of English can leave ethnic communities, especially the elderly, highly socially vulnerable in the context of COVID-19. Within ethnic communities, there are many self-employed or small business owners, which cannot operate under Alert Level 4 – a large number of which are in Auckland.
- 21 The potential to move to AL3 for Auckland will bring the same benefits to communities already in AL3. While the restrictions at AL3 are relatively similar to AL4, the ability to have contactless pick-up and delivery and expand bubbles will be particularly beneficial to isolated segments of communities.
- 22 If AL4 in Auckland continues we are likely to see already familiar issues continue but to a lesser extent due to the government and community response over the last few weeks. Examples of issues have been a lack of options for culturally appropriate food from food banks, and the stress of senior citizens who may have language barriers or anxiety around leaving the house for essential items or vaccination. Moving down to AL2 in parts of the country has already enabled businesses to operate and allowed small gatherings, which has provided many communities the opportunity to reconnect with their wider communities and support networks.
- 23 The Alert Level changes over the course of the COVID-19 response have highlighted persistent systemic vulnerabilities for ethnic communities which will need to be addressed in the medium to long term through effort across government.

Older people

- 24 Issues that will impact older people during a longer period of time spent at higher Alert Levels include:

- 24.1 Accessing online services – some people still pay bills in person and will be impacted by the lockdown and not being able to pay their essential service bills (power, telephone etc).
- 24.2 Food delivery services – during lockdown, older people are encouraged to get others to do their shopping. This becomes problematic if they can't go online or aren't able to get someone to assist them. Sometimes payment becomes an issue (access to cash).
- 24.3 Anxiety – how older people keep themselves and others safe will continue generate anxiety due to the virulent nature of the Delta strain. These increased levels of anxiety are reportedly putting demands on providers that specialise in providing support to older people. Officials predict that demand for these services will remain high.
- 24.4 Resuming normal activities – the longer we remain at Alert Level 3 or 4 the more difficult it becomes for older people to resume normal activities with confidence. Moving to Alert Level 2 will be widely welcomed by older people, however many will continue to have heightened levels of anxiety.

Young people

- 25 As reported previously, officials have seen a significant surge in support being sought by young people in relation to their mental and general wellbeing. Temporary funding has been allocated to Youthline to support the significant increase in demand they are experiencing. There continues to be an increasing number of incidents reported by the Youthline Helpline. This week saw the highest number of incidents reported for the year so far (111 incidents this week, which was an increase of 14% from last week). A total of 64 incidents this week were related to suicide.
- 26 Providers are reporting that there are pockets of young people across the country struggling. There are a range of issues being reported, including needing support to leave unsafe living environments, being isolated and having no way to engage support networks, misinformation around vaccine risk leading to a lack of interest in being vaccinated, increased anxiety, and young people with disabilities facing challenges with accessing supports, and COVID-19 testing and vaccinations.
- 27 Online learning/education has been a consistent concern for young people over the lockdown period. This included issues with access to devices or Wi-Fi connection, inadequate space at home, and young people struggling to engage with online learning. There are some concerns young people may not return to school post-lockdown. The extension of the lockdown restrictions is also creating stress for young people who are looking to transition to tertiary education or secondary school, as they are missing out on open days and face-to-face meetings with universities/colleges.

People experiencing family violence or sexual violence

- 28 Sector bodies have not reported any significant shifts in demand for sexual violence and family violence services since Alert Level 4 commenced. Preliminary data from Police shows that there has been a small increase in family harm reports, noting that they fluctuate due to a range of external factors, and it is currently within the normal range. It may be that people are finding it difficult to reach out for support, and this may result in an increased demand for relevant services as areas reach lower Alert Levels. The Ministry of Social Development is continuing to keep closely connected to the family and sexual violence sector to monitor any increased demand so it can understand additional support that may be required.
- 29 MSD is re-airing SafeBubble campaign key messages of “It’s OK to ask for help” and “Help is still available”, geo-targeted to Auckland. The campaign will let people know that help continues to be available while “in their bubbles”.

Low income individuals and households

- 30 Income disruption due to Alert Level 3 and 4 may make it harder for some people to meet their current and future financial obligations. The impact on current financial obligations has been reported by community food providers where the majority of people seeking food parcels are on low incomes (for example due to reduced wages or the wage subsidy scheme not being sufficient) as opposed to MSD clients on a main benefit.



Cabinet

Minute of Decision

This document contains information for the New Zealand Cabinet. It must be treated in confidence and handled in accordance with any security classification, or other endorsement. The information can only be released, including under the Official Information Act 1982, by persons with the appropriate authority.

COVID-19 Response: 13 September 2021 Review of Alert Level Settings

Portfolio COVID-19 Response

On 13 September 2021, Cabinet:

Advice on the current COVID-19 situation

- 1 **noted** that since 17 August 2021, 955 community cases of COVID-19 have been identified in New Zealand (as of 9.00 am, Monday, 13 September 2021);
- 2 **noted** that on Monday 6 September 2021, Cabinet agreed to keep Auckland at Alert Level 4 until at least 11.59 pm Tuesday 14 September 2021; agreed to shift the rest of New Zealand to Alert Level 2, from 11.59 pm Tuesday 7 September 2021; and agreed to review these settings on Monday, 13 September 2021 [CAB-21-MIN-0360];
- 3 **noted** the Director-General of Health's interim public health advice is:
 - 3.1 Auckland cases continue to trend downward over time;
 - 3.2 there is no evidence to suggest there is undetected community transmission outside of Auckland, based on ongoing good rates of testing;
 - 3.3 evidence suggests the outbreak within the Auckland region is becoming contained to clearly identifiable communities; and
 - 3.4 the COVID-19 risk for Auckland is now considered medium and the rest of New Zealand remains low;

Alert Levels

- 4 **noted** the Director-General of Health's interim public health advice is that:
 - 4.1 Auckland move to Alert Level 3 from 11.59 pm on Thursday, 16 September 2021, with a review on Tuesday, 28 September 2021;
 - 4.2 the rest of New Zealand remain at Alert Level 2 with a review on Monday, 20 September 2021, with the potential to move to Alert Level 1 at a suitable subsequent date; and
 - 4.3 Cabinet could agree to move the rest of the country to Alert Level 1, providing there is no escalation in Auckland's COVID-19 risk, when it meets on Monday, 20 September 2021;

- 5 **agreed** that an appropriate measure in response to the level of public health risk is for:
- 5.1 Auckland to remain at Alert Level 4 until 11.59 pm, Tuesday, 21 September 2021;
 - 5.2 the rest of New Zealand to remain at Alert Level 2 until at least 11.59 pm, Tuesday, 21 September 2021;
- 6 **agreed in principle** to move Auckland to Alert Level 3 from 11.59 pm, Tuesday 21 September 2021, **subject to** further public health advice and review at Cabinet on Monday, 20 September 2021;
- 7 **agreed** that Cabinet next review the Alert Level settings for Auckland and the rest of New Zealand on Monday, 20 September 2021;

Alert Level boundaries

- 8 **noted** Cabinet has previously agreed to permissions for movement across the Alert Level 4/2 boundary for work and non-work purposes [CAB-21-MIN-0360];
- 9 **noted** the Director-General's advice is that there remains a need to ensure permitted movement across an Alert Level 3/2 boundary is very limited because at Alert Level 3 there remains a medium risk of community transmission of COVID-19;
- 10 **agreed** to the permitted movement across an Alert Level 3/2 boundary being the existing Alert Level 4/2 permissions in the current Order (including permitted movement for businesses and services and non-work purposes) and the following additional personal categories:
- 10.1 to visit the dying;
 - 10.2 accompany a tūpāpaku or deceased person to a tangihanga or funeral; and
 - 10.3 attending a tangihanga or funeral;
- 11 **noted** that following Auckland moving to Alert Level 3, the Minister for COVID-19 Response will ask Cabinet to consider whether further permissions for travel across the Alert Level 3/2 boundary should be allowed to address personal circumstances that are causing undue hardship and to enable some workers in key industries to travel to limit impacts on major infrastructure projects and supply chains;
- 12 **noted** that on 6 September 2021, Cabinet agreed both that workers at Alert Level 4 businesses and services (and any workers doing necessary work at any premises) be required to carry evidence of a COVID-19 test within the last seven days when crossing an Alert Level boundary, and that people permitted to travel for personal reasons be encouraged to have a test [CAB-21-MIN-0360 refers];
- 13 **agreed** to retain the Alert Level 4/2 testing requirements for permitted work travel under an Alert Level 3/2 boundary;
- 14 **agreed in principle, subject to** further advice to COVID-19 Ministers on the details of the proposal by 15 September 2021, that people who move across an Alert Level 4/2 or Alert Level 3/2 boundary for:
- 14.1 personal reasons on a regular basis, be required to carry evidence of having had a COVID-19 test within seven days of crossing the boundary; and

- 14.2 personal reasons that involve undertaking a single trip, be required to carry evidence of a negative COVID-19 test received within 72 hours of crossing the boundary;
- 15 **agreed** that people who move across an Alert Level 4/2 or Alert Level 3/2 boundary due to an emergency, to provide urgent care for a child or care or support to a person in a critical or terminal condition if no other appropriate person is able, or are going home after isolation or quarantine, are exempt from the testing requirement proposed in paragraph 13;
- 16 **agreed** that individuals permitted to transit through an Alert Level 3 or Alert Level 4 area by air or road are exempt from the testing requirement proposed in paragraph 13;

Other matters

- 17 **agreed** that Cabinet's decision today be communicated by the Prime Minister.

Michael Webster
Secretary of the Cabinet

Proactively Released