



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 Resurgence: First Review of Alert Level Settings in Response to Further Auckland Community Cases

Portfolio COVID-19 Response

On 5 March 2021, Cabinet:

Situation update

- 1 **noted** that on 27 February 2021, Cabinet agreed that moving Auckland to Alert Level 3 and the rest of the country to Alert Level 2 was an appropriate public health measure to respond to the risks of the outbreak or spread of COVID-19;
- 2 **noted** there was one further related positive case on 28 February 2021;
- 3 **noted** that, based on the evidence available to date, the Ministry of Health considers there is no evidence of community transmission and the cluster is under control;
- 4 **noted** the updated advice from the Director-General of Health on the current situation;

Review of Alert Levels

- 5 **agreed** that Auckland move to Alert Level 2 and the rest of the country to Alert Level 1 with effect from 6:00 am on Sunday 7 March 2021, for a period of six days;
- 6 **agreed** that Cabinet next review the Alert Levels on Thursday, 11 March 2021;
- 7 **agreed** that the Alert Level boundary remain the same as it is under the current COVID-19 Public Health Response (Alert Level Requirements) Order (No 4) 2021;

Face coverings on public transport

- 8 **agreed** that the current requirement for face coverings on public transport throughout New Zealand is an appropriate measure in response to the level of public health risk and it be continued in the Order giving effect to the decision in paragraph 5 above;

Other matters

- 9 **agreed** that once a decision is made to change Alert Levels, officials provide advance notice to international partners including (but not restricted to): Australia, the Cook Islands, and Niue and those foreign diplomatic and consular staff based in, or accredited to, New Zealand;

- 10 **noted** that officials will provide the Minister of COVID-19 Response with advice on how to increase behaviours that support fast and accurate contact tracing this week;
- 11 **agreed** that Cabinet's decision today be communicated by the Prime Minister.

Michael Webster
Secretary of the Cabinet

Office of the Minister for COVID-19 Response

Cabinet

COVID-19 RESURGENCE: FIRST REVIEW OF ALERT LEVEL SETTINGS IN RESPONSE TO FURTHER AUCKLAND COMMUNITY CASES

Proposal

- 1 This paper reviews the situation in response to the further community COVID-19 cases identified in Auckland on 27 February. The paper seeks agreement to one of the following options:
 - 1.1 Option A: Keep Auckland at Alert Level 3 and move the rest of the country to Alert Level 1; or
 - 1.2 Option B: Move Auckland to Alert Level 2 and the rest of the country to Alert Level 1 (recommended).

Summary

- 2 As at 10:30am on March 5, we have discovered 15 positive cases outside MIQ since 13 February that form the current cluster, all of whom are either isolated or recovered. All the cases are genomically linked.
- 3 Cases M and N tested positive on 27 February and precipitated Auckland moving back to Alert Level 3 the next day. One further case (Case O) returned a positive test on 28 February. Case O was already isolating.
- 4 The paper presents two options:
 - 4.1 Option A: Keep Auckland at Alert Level 3 and move the rest of country to Alert Level 1; or
 - 4.2 Option B: Move Auckland to Alert Level 2 and the rest of the country to Alert Level 1 (recommended).
- 5 The Director-General of Health's interim recommendation at the time of writing this paper is Option B for a period of six days.
- 6 In terms of when the change in Alert Level would come into effect there are three options:
 - 6.1 from 6:00am on Saturday 6 March; or
 - 6.2 from 6:00am on Sunday 7 March (Director-General of Health's recommendation); or
 - 6.3 from 11:59pm on Sunday 7 March.
- 7 There have been some significant challenges in the response to this latest outbreak related to our usual approach to communications.

- 8 Agencies are working to improve how we engage with communities with different language and ethnicities, including through partnering with the Office for Ethnic Communities, Ministry for Pacific Peoples and local leaders.

Introduction

- 9 This paper has three main parts:
- 9.1 a summary of the eight factors we use to make Alert Level decisions;
 - 9.2 a situation report against those eight factors, including the initial views of the Director-General; and
 - 9.3 options for changes to Alert Levels in Auckland and the rest of the country in the next phase.

How we make Alert Level decisions

- 10 Cabinet has previously agreed to use eight factors to guide decisions on the appropriate Alert Level settings for New Zealand:
- 10.1 the Director-General of Health's satisfaction on four health matters:
 - 10.1.1 trends in the transmission of the virus, including his confidence in the data and having regard to the risk assessment levels agreed by Cabinet;
 - 10.1.2 the capacity and capability of our testing and contact tracing systems;
 - 10.1.3 the effectiveness of our self-isolation, quarantine and border measures; and
 - 10.1.4 the capacity in the health system more generally to move to the new Alert Level;
 - 10.2 evidence of the effects of the measures on the economy and society more broadly;
 - 10.3 evidence of the impacts of the measures for at risk populations in particular;
 - 10.4 public attitudes towards the measures and the extent to which people and businesses understand, accept, and abide by them; and
 - 10.5 our ability to operationalise the restrictions, including satisfactory implementation planning regions [CAB-20-MIN-0199; CAB-20-MIN-0387 refer].
- 11 In line with our resurgence plan, in determining what measures and controls should be in place after the immediate response phase, we are particularly interested in:
- 11.1 the connection of cases to a known source at the border;

11.2 the number of cases and close contacts; and

11.3 the geographic spread of cases, including across regions.

Situation report

The current response

- 12 On the afternoon of Saturday 27 February, the Ministry of Health was notified of an additional community case (Case M). Case M is the sibling of a casual-plus contact associated with Papatoetoe High School. That evening a positive test was confirmed for the mother of Case M (Case N). Initially there were concerns there was no clear epidemiological links between Cases M and N to the cluster. However, a link has been established between Case N and an earlier case in the cluster (F) who went for a walk together during Case F's infectious period. Case O, the mother in a household (Cases I – L), also returned a positive test on Sunday 28 February.
- 13 At 6:00am on Sunday 28 February, Auckland moved to Alert Level 3 and the rest of New Zealand to Alert Level 2 [CAB-21-MIN-0041 refers].
- 14 Papatoetoe High School was closed again from 1 March until further notice as a precaution to prevent any further spread of COVID-19. All remaining students to be tested after the 22 February have now been tested other than two students who are on individual management plans.
- 15 On 2 March Auckland Region Public Health Service (ARPHS) commenced a program of home visits to close contacts of recent cases associated with the school. The visits are being undertaken by community service providers. The visits have a dual purpose of welfare and wellness support together with assurance of compliance with self-isolation requirements. Since Monday 1 March, 45 home visits have been made for the self-isolating close contacts of Cases M and N.
- 16 ARPHS continue to investigate the source of the cluster (Cases A and B) with several working hypotheses being investigated in line with returned test results. The Ministry of Health will report back on the source investigation shortly.

Testing rates and contact tracing

- 17 Over 105,986 people have been tested in the Auckland region between 14 February and 4 March.
- 18 Between 14 February and 4 March, 50,132 tests (41,557 people tested) in the Counties Manukau DHB catchment. An overview of testing and results is provided in Table 1 (as at 4 March). The remaining contacts for whom tests have not been completed or results returned, will continue to be managed. Table 1 will be updated at Cabinet.

Table 1: Test results for all contacts by contact type (as at 4 March)

Contact Type	Initial Testing Result	Day 12 Testing Result
All Contacts		
Close-plus Contacts	86/86 (86 negative)	7/86 (7 negatives, 79 no result)
Close-plus Contacts	170/175 (11 positive, 159 negative, 2 exempt, 3 no result)	129/162 (1 positive, 128 negatives, 33 no result)
Casual-plus Contacts (treated as close contacts *Kmart)	1845/1885 (1845 negative, 18 exempt, 22 no result (2 of which have declined a test))	655/1867 (655 negatives, 1212 no result)
Casual-plus Contacts	3651/3753 (3 positive, 3648 negatives, 102 no result)	N/A
Key to table Exempt contacts are those people exempt from testing, including children. Contacts with no result from initial testing may include those where a test has been taken but not yet processed, no test has been taken yet, and a test has been refused. All contacts in this category are being actively followed up via welfare checks. Contacts with no result from Day 12 tests include those where day 12 has not yet been reached, noting that period for day 12 from exposure continues until 12 March.		

- 19 Of the 28 casual-plus contacts of Cases M and N with no initial test result, 14 were expected to be swabbed on 3 and 4 March. Fourteen are overdue for their day five test; 12 of these have been contacted and provided advice on testing and isolation. The two not yet contacted are being actively followed up.
- 20 Case O has no contacts or exposures as they were already in isolation during their possible infectious period.
- 21 The Ministry of Health have estimated that there will be 65 close and close-plus contacts who will still be required to be in isolation past Sunday 7 March.
- 22 The ongoing management of contacts will include, but not be limited to:
 - 22.1 ongoing welfare visits/calls ensuring that the needs of the contact and their households are being met, including food;
 - 22.2 symptom checks (as part of welfare visits) to ensure the contacts remain well and that they remain isolated and following directions from the Ministry of Health or Public Health Unit to contain the spread of COVID-19;
 - 22.3 support to enable them to meet testing requirements either at local Community Testing Centres or by way of mobile testing unit home visits.

Wastewater testing

- 23 Daily wastewater testing has been undertaken for passive surveillance at sites across the Auckland region since July 2020. All sites have typically returned

negative results with the exception of the site near Jet Park (a consequence of COVID-19 cases quarantined in that facility). Wastewater testing results were last reported on 5 March. Samples taken on Saturday 20 February from the site near Jet Park returned negative results, but samples taken from this site on 21, 22, 23 and 24 February and 3 March were positive. All other results from tests across Auckland were negative in this period, including the site nearest Papatoetoe High School.

Genome sequencing

- 24 Whole Genomic Sequencing (WGS) analysis has been completed for all 15 cases in the February cluster, all of which are closely linked to each other. All positive community cases have been observed to have the variant 20B/501Y.V1 (Lineage B.1.1.7) which is known to be more transmissible and first identified in the United Kingdom.

Where in the incubation period are the cases?

- 25 According to Ministry of Health none of the cases in the cluster are still infectious – the infectious period for both Cases M and N ended on 27 February. Case O has no contacts or exposures as they were already in isolation during their possible infectious period.

Assessment of the relevant health factors

- 26 In terms of the health factors I note:
- 26.1 There is sufficient capacity in testing and contact tracing to respond to the current outbreak. More than 68,000 tests have been processed in the last week. For the current outbreak, between 14 February to 28 February, 15 cases were identified and over 5,700 contacts have been traced and isolated. This compares to 2,643 contacts in August 2020 and 1,766 in January 2021 and demonstrates the scalable capacity within the contact tracing system. Capacity is provided through a combination of all 12 Public Health Units, the Ministry's National Investigation & Tracing Centre (and their call centre providers).
 - 26.2 For the February outbreak, 88% of close contacts of a positive case have been contacted within 48 hours from the time a PHU was notified of the case, exceeding the target of 80%. In response to the UK variant, a more cautious approach has been taken to intensify the identification and management of contacts in some settings. As tailored approaches are implemented, this has led to some confusion in the public domain highlighting the need for clear communication about contact categories. It has also challenged the way in which the Ministry of Health and other agencies engage with communities from different ethnic and language backgrounds.
 - 26.3 Although we cannot be certain of the source of the new outbreak, border measures remain robust and there is no evidence of systemic failure. Demand for testing and telephone consultations over this period

demonstrates that the public takes the situation seriously where there is risk.

- 26.4 The health system has sufficient capacity, including workforce and ICU capacity. However, there are some pressures as the vaccination programme rolls out. There is sufficient PPE for those for whom it is recommended.
- 26.5 Genomic testing has confirmed that the cases (other than Case C) are linked and of the United Kingdom variant. The source remains under investigation.

Interim view of the Director-General

- 27 Having reviewed the public health factors agreed by Cabinet to be considered in relation to Alert Level decisions and based on evidence as at 11:30am Thursday 4 March, the Director-General's current assessment is outlined as follows.
- 28 In relation to the current outbreak, there are several public health questions that inform his advice.

Has a source been identified that links Cases M and N to previous cases?

- 29 Yes – a link was established between Cases F and N which means we are confident that there is only one identifiable cluster at this point.

Is there extensive community testing showing there are no community cases unconnected to the current outbreak?

- 30 On 3 March 2021, 14,671 tests were processed nationwide, bringing the weekly total of tests processed last week to more than 68,000. Between 14 February and 3 March, 41,557 people have been tested across Counties Manukau DHB. There were no community cases identified that were unconnected to the outbreak.

Have all close and casual plus contacts been tested and have they remained/are remaining in self-isolation until a negative test has been returned?

- 31 The vast majority of close and casual-plus contacts have been identified and tested. Of all 2136 contacts identified through the February cluster, 2093 have had a negative test result. 2089 have had a Day 5 test (two were exempt, and two had a follow-up test). Day 12 tests are due between 3 March and 12 March 2021. As at 4 March, 373 of the 2136 contacts have returned negative test results.
- 32 2132 of the 2136 have been contacted and are self-isolating. The remaining four have been identified and are awaiting confirmation of contact.
- 33 However, there are 102 identified casual-plus contacts out of a total of 3753, who were exposed at locations including MIT and the gym Case M visited, that have not received all recommended tests. These people are receiving active support and follow up.

Has wastewater testing in the Auckland region revealed any results that cannot be attributed to known case?

- 34 Regular wastewater testing continues in Auckland. In the most recent testing reported on Monday 1 March the only site that showed positive results on 21, 22, 23 and 24 February were from the site near the Jetpark managed quarantine facility. All other sites up until 1 March have shown negative results.

Do we have confidence that there has been no community spread to other geographical regions outside of Auckland?

- 35 There is no evidence of community transmission outside the Auckland region. This is in the context of high levels of testing nationwide in recent weeks. During February 2021, wastewater testing has been undertaken at sites in New Plymouth, Hamilton, Rotorua and Christchurch. Wastewater testing at these sites has not revealed any evidence that COVID-19 has spread.
- 36 The Director-General does not consider that it is absolutely necessary for all close contacts to return their day 12 test result in order for Alert Level restrictions to be lifted, as these contacts will already be self-isolating meaning that if they do later become a case, they should not have exposed anyone else except possibly their immediate household. Additionally, most people that become cases do so within 5-7 days since their last exposure with a positive case and would have already been identified at their day 5-7 test.

Director-General's interim recommendation

- 37 Accordingly, based on the available evidence at 5pm 4 March 2021, the Director-General's interim recommendation is that Auckland move to Alert Level 2 and the rest of the country move to Alert Level 1 from 6:00am on Sunday 7 March 2021 for six days with a review on Friday 12 March.
- 38 There are still test results outstanding. Technically the residual risks from these could be managed locally at Alert Level 1 through ARPHS. However, out of an abundance of caution and to cover off any potential (albeit small) residual risks, he recommends that Auckland move to Alert Level 2 until we have received all remaining test results from close and casual-plus contacts. Alert Level 2 also provides a signal to Aucklanders about the need to remain vigilant and places limits on large gatherings.
- 39 This advice will be updated at Cabinet.

Effect of the measures on the economy

- 40 The Treasury estimates the economic costs of Alert Level restrictions in terms of the impact on Gross Domestic Product. These need to be weighed against the risk of not stamping this resurgence out quickly. This risk is likely to require longer periods at higher Alert Levels, with significantly higher economic, fiscal and social costs. The estimated economic costs of different Alert Levels are based on historical data, and do not reflect how firms and households may adapt behaviour.

- 41 There is still considerable uncertainty about the magnitude of the impact of the Alert Level restrictions. Treasury last formally estimated the impacts of the Alert Level restrictions in the forecasts for the Half-Year Economic and Fiscal Update (HYEFU) 2020. Since then, Treasury has formed a view that the impact of the restrictions is likely to be smaller than previously estimated:
- 42 GDP data from the third quarter of 2020 shows that the economy performed better than anticipated. This suggests that the impact of higher Alert Levels may be lower than previously thought, at least when there is significant fiscal support in place.
- 43 Some proportion of the lost activity will also be made up later in the year if the period of heightened Alert Level restrictions is relatively short.
- 44 Treasury will conduct a formal review of the Alert Level impact estimates after the release of the GDP data for the fourth quarter of 2020. In the meantime, Treasury has undertaken a very rough adjustment of the HYEFU estimates to allow for the issues discussed above. The results are as follows:

Table 2: Approximate economic impacts of the Alert Level restrictions

Restrictions	Reduction in economic activity per week	
Maintaining the status quo: AL3 in Auckland and AL2 in the rest of NZ	\$250 million	4% of national GDP
AL3 in Auckland and AL1 in the rest of NZ	\$150 million	2% of national GDP
AL2 in Auckland and AL1 in the rest of NZ	\$50 million	1% of national GDP

- 45 It is important to note that some of these GDP losses would occur even in the absence of any Alert Level restrictions, as people would adjust their behaviour in response to perceived risk.
- 46 The impacts will differ across industries and within regions, for example central business districts with more businesses that rely on foot traffic typically experiencing larger declines in economic activity during lockdowns and a slower recovery. A further example is the loss of large events such as concerts and sports matches which are harder to defer. This makes the economic and social benefits from these events less likely to be delivered and they also feature “sunk costs” from their preparation. These sectors are more likely to face longer term impacts if consumer and business confidence falls due to uncertainty over whether there will be ongoing public health restrictions.
- 47 As we have moved into Alert level three in Auckland, domestic airlines have seen a significant demand impact on flights going into and out of Auckland. Given the requirement that people are not eligible to travel out of Auckland except for the purposes of essential work, this is expected. Demand has fallen significantly, which is a mix of people changing journeys, cancelling travel, or simply not presenting for booked flights. It is not viable for airlines to continue operating with non-commercial loadings, and as a result, we are seeing airlines pull back on the domestic network over the next few days. This will impact regional connectivity. For example, we understand that Taupo is currently not

open to air services during this period. Should lockdown extend, or levels be raised, connectivity is likely to be further eroded.

- 48 However, in spite of the short term social and economic costs, it must be remembered the longer-term costs of failing to move up Alert Levels in response to an outbreak would be significant. This is clearly evident in a range of other countries whose economies have been significantly impacted as a result.

Economic support measures

- 49 Following Cabinet's decision on Saturday 27 February to increase Alert Levels, Cabinet agreed on Monday 1 March, that the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) and Resurgence Support Payment (RSP) would be activated [CAB-21-MIN-0043 and CAB-21-MIN-0042 refer]. The RSP had previously been activated for firms affected by the Alert Level restrictions in place from 15 February 2020. Irrespective of what is decided in this paper, the decisions from 1 March stand and the WSS and RSP will be in place for this period.
- 50 The WSS was opened to receive applications on Thursday 4 March, with payments being made from Monday 8 March. The RSP opens for applications on the 8 March, with payments expected within 24 hours for most firms.
- 51 Other support for businesses includes two employer-based support schemes available for those affected by COVID-19 where individuals cannot work from home:
- 51.1 The COVID-19 Short-Term Absence Payment (STAP) – available for businesses, including self-employed people, to help pay their workers who cannot work from home while they wait for a COVID-19 test result. The STAP is a one-off payment of \$350 and includes those on casual contracts who need to miss work.
- 51.2 The Leave Support Scheme (LSS) – for those who meet certain criteria and have been told to self-isolate, cannot go to work, and cannot work from home. Employers, including self-employed people can access this scheme. The LSS is paid as a lump sum and covers two weeks for each eligible employee – it is paid at a rate of \$585.80 per week for people working 20 hours or more (full time rate), and \$350 per week for those working less than 20 hours (part time rate). The employer must pay their employees any amount required by the employment agreement and employment legislation. While employers are able to access the scheme for casual workers, they need to meet their obligations to retain workers for the duration of the payment. This could include either part-time or full-time staff.
- 52 The Ministry of Social Development has seen an increase in the total number of applications for the STAP over February 2021:
- 52.1 87 applications approved in the week ending 12 February, with \$29,400 paid to employers;

- 52.2 1,209 applications approved in the week ending 19 February, with \$483,700 paid to employers; and
- 52.3 2,268 applications approved in the week ending 26 February, with \$1.019 million paid to employers.
- 53 The number of Leave Support Scheme applications continues to increase – with 3,000 applications approved between 31 July 2020 and 26 February 2021 and \$19.382 million being paid out under this scheme. The current spend under this scheme is lower than the \$126 million forecast for 2020/21 by the Treasury when the Leave Support Scheme was established last May.
- 54 Officials are tracking the number of applications approved over the week ending 5 March as an indicator of the level of support that Aucklanders have accessed during Alert Level 3. From 12 March 2021, weekly information on the Leave Support Scheme and Short -Term Absence Payment will be published on the Ministry of Social Development website.
- 55 There is also non-COVID-19 support that individuals and families can seek via Work and Income, including:
- 55.1 support for those on a low income who may need help with essential costs (e.g. food, accommodation costs, utilities, medical and dental costs). The type of support depends on a client's individual circumstances (income and assets, partner's situation, etc).
- 55.2 a range of financial supports available for working families, including those who are struggling due to COVID-19. This may include hardship assistance or main benefit support

Impacts on at risk populations

- 56 Communities with a higher prevalence of long-term conditions and diseases, higher barriers to access health care and testing, and larger households and a higher prevalence of overcrowding that limit the possibilities for physical distancing are especially vulnerable to COVID-19. Such communities, across various ethnicities, are prevalent in the current cluster.
- 57 A number of exposure sites in this cluster have high numbers of casual workers. Access to employment and the concern of losing income along with access to education are two areas of concern that have been noted as generating significant fear and anxiety amongst the wider population.
- 58 Pacific communities have expressed concern over the impacts of lockdown on RSE workers, the pressures on families who are unable to return home and management of internal/personal issues due to schemes not being properly managed. At the same time there is growing concern for overstayers' welfare and the exacerbated financial pressures impacting Pacific churches and communities.
- 59 Agencies have focussed on supporting the different communities in South Auckland (including for disabled people, older people and ethnic communities).

There has been effective communication by Government with Māori and Pacific community leaders and institutions

- 60 The Ministry of Social Development (working with Te Puni Kōkiri and Ministry for Pacific Peoples) have updated their website with a list of providers in South Auckland who have been supported with additional funding for COVID-19 response and recovery, with think to other funding within agencies. In addition, some of the providers have been proactively contacted to understand what further support needs providers may have over and above funding and services that has been provided for resurgence activity.
- 61 Overall schools, early learning services and tertiary education providers are doing well. The Ministry of Education is confident that Auckland-based services, schools and organisations are implementing appropriate measures for their staff and children, students and whānau. The Ministry of Education and TEC continue to work closely with services, schools and providers.
- 62 The Ministry reports that “Alert Level fatigue” is noticeable at some schools operating at Alert Level 3. Staff are anxious about being onsite and the risk it poses to themselves and their families. Some parents are working from home and sending their children to school as it is difficult for them to manage at home. This is putting pressure on schools to manage more children onsite at Alert Level 3 than previous events.

Cross boundary travel and exemptions

- 63 When Auckland moved back to Alert Level 3 on 28 February the same boundary was used for when Auckland had previously been at Alert Level 3 (with the addition of Port Waikato and a correction between there and Te Kauwhata). Also the same categories of movement across the boundary were permitted and the Director-General of Health carried over exemptions for individuals granted under the previous Alert Level 3/2 Order.
- 64 The Business Travel Documentation system developed by the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) continues to function well. Travel Documents issued previously remain valid and do not need to be reissued. Exemption decisions are being returned to applicants within the 2-day turnaround target. MBIE and Health report that these applications have slowed down throughout the week.
- 65 Police report that people are generally aware of the need for evidence to justify travel between Alert Levels and have only had to turn 2 percent of traffic away from the boundary. As at 3 March, Police report 58,633 vehicles were stopped at boundary checkpoints since 6am on 28 February. The low volume of traffic being turned around also supported the view that people are not travelling unless they need to.
- 66 As at 4 March:
- 66.1 The Ministry of Health received 4030 applications for personal travel exemptions. Of those, 2044 were automatically granted as they were permitted reasons under the Order.

66.2 MBIE had issued 35,093 individual travel documents for business reasons.

- 67 In order to ensure the system is not being abused, agencies are conducting a spot check of the documentation issued automatically through the MBIE system for permitted travel during the period from 14-17 February. MBIE does have the ability to cancel any QR codes if needed and will work with industry groups if there are any systematic compliance issues in any particular sector.
- 68 There was a steady build-up of traffic at checkpoints on Sunday from mid-morning with some queues forming. Southern queues eventually dissipated by 2am. North queues eased that night. Traffic flow throughout the day on 1 March was manageable with no major issues reported. Waka Kotahi reported that on 4 March traffic flow across the Alert Level boundary was 30-45 percent less than normal.
- 69 The relatively modest reduction in travel across the Alert Level boundary, and that generally there have been relatively few issues with the boundary, reflect that the current Order permitted a high level of movement across the boundary compared to the August 2020 resurgence. Specifically, it continued the categories of businesses and services permitted to cross the boundary that were included in the 14 February Order. This included all of Category 2 businesses and services that Cabinet has previously noted would likely be permitted but for which an assessment would be required in each resurgence [CBC-20-MIN-0122 refers].

Public attitudes and compliance

Public attitudes

- 70 Since 1 March, negative sentiment on Unite Against COVID social media channels increased by 5 percent to 18 percent compared with the previous week. Comments were aimed more towards individuals who did not self-isolate (which it is perceived as the cause of the Alert Level change) than about moving back up Alert Levels.
- 71 Understanding the changes to contact tracing has been confusing for people. In particular the new categories of casual-plus and close-plus contacts, and different instructions for household members depending on whether they were customers or staff at a location of interest is contributing to this. Agencies are working together to strengthen the communications approach regarding school outbreaks.
- 72 There have also been concerns raised by Pacific and ethnic communities and agencies about the effectiveness of the communications to ethnic, disabled communities, particularly youth in those communities.
- 73 Government communications channels have continued to ensure that messaging is easy to understand, with plain language, that there is effective use of visual messaging (such as posters) and video messages, a wide range of distribution channels and methods of communication are utilised to increase

accessibility, and there is a more systematic approach to translating messages into a wider range of languages, in written, visual, and video formats.

- 74 The Unite Against COVID-19 website has information translated in 25 different languages, and detailed information about welfare support available has been translated into 12 languages, including Hindi, Punjabi and Vietnamese, to ensure wider reach into vulnerable populations.
- 75 Social license remains crucial to a successful COVID-19 response. The public reaction to particular individuals who have not used the COVID-19 tracer app or otherwise failed to follow good practices suggests a possible erosion of this. Further erosion could undermine the overall response. Communications about the response should continue to reinforce the need to stay the course, follow the usual hygiene measures, scan the COVID-19 tracer app and continue 'being kind'. Reinforcing positive communications messaging might go some way to help reverse the 5 percent increase in negative sentiment on social media channels.

Behaviours to support contact tracing

- 76 Rates of use of the COVID-19 Tracer App continue to be relatively low. As at 2 March there had been around 1.5 million a day for the past week (there are over 2.5 million registered users of the App). The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Ministry of Health are working to promote use and high-quality capture of information needed for rapid contact tracing via the COVID-19 Tracer App. They will provide me with advice on how to increase behaviours that support fast and accurate contact tracing next week.

Compliance with restrictions on movement between Alert Level areas

- 77 Police report that on the whole people have generally been cooperative and are appreciative of the circumstances.
- 78 To support the alert level changes, Avsec staff were deployed to the front doors of Auckland Airport on Sunday 28 February to assist with checking passengers travelling were permitted to do so under the travel restrictions. Whilst there were queues outside the terminal on Sunday in particular, Avsec reports that people were generally tolerant and understanding of the need for the measures. Avsec is working closely with Auckland Airport to ensure systems are working and fit for purpose. At the other five main airports, Avsec is also checking those going to Auckland, either at the gate or at the screening point.
- 79 In general, the majority of general complaints through Police and the Unite Against COVID-19 website appear to be quite low level and relate to businesses not displaying QR codes, small gatherings, and people socialising.
- 80 Between 28 February and 3 March, WorkSafe undertook 55 assessments in Alert Level 2 and 3 regions relating to COVID-19. As at 4 March, six verbal directions had been issued, including three in Auckland relating to contact tracing and QR code displays.

Options

- 81 Based on information to date, the situation suggests a single cluster of connected cases in a region, with no evidence of wider spread in the region and no cases in other regions. This suggests Auckland should move to Alert Level 2, and the rest of the country to Level 1, while retaining face coverings on public transport.
- 82 The critical question is how long we should wait before moving down alert levels. Central to this is when the last known case was infectious and our confidence that all the contacts that person had in that time are being isolated and checked on. It appears that the UK variant (which genome sequencing confirms these cases are) has “a longer tail” meaning infections may not emerge until later suggesting we should perhaps delay moving down alert levels.
- 83 The Ministry of Health’s advice is that none of the cases in the current cluster are still in their infectious period.
- 84 I have identified two options for Cabinet to consider, dependant on the situation as reported at the time Cabinet meets, that I consider are appropriate measures in response to the level of public health risk:
- 84.1 Option A: Keep Auckland at Alert Level 3 and the rest of country move to Alert Level 1 to contain the cluster in Auckland;
- 84.2 Option B: Move Auckland to Alert Level 2 and the rest of the country to Alert Level 1 contingent on there being no further cases identified that point to there being undetected community transmission;
- 85 At the time of writing, informed by the advice of the Director-General of Health and adopting a precautionary approach, I recommend Option B. The Director-General of Health recommends the change in Alert Level come into effect on Sunday 7 March for a period of six days (following a review on Friday 12 March).

Option A

- 86 Under this option Auckland stays at Alert Level 3 while the rest of the country returns to Alert Level 1.
- 87 This option makes sense if:
- 87.1 we are confident there is a very low chance there are undetected cases outside of the Auckland region – in large part this reflects confidence in our Alert Level boundary and restrictions on travel; but
- 87.2 we are not confident there is no risk of undetected transmission in the Auckland region.
- 88 It would balance the economic and social costs of restrictions of Level 2 against the small risk of emergence of the virus, particularly in areas very distant from Auckland. However, cases may emerge in other regions that we have not yet seen and could spread quickly in a Level 1 environment with relatively few

restrictions. An interregional boundary would continue to need to be enforced with particular thinking needed about how to manage the very big change in Alert Level settings between Levels 3 and 1, particularly whether or not Cabinet would want to reduce the number of permitted travel categories to avoid spread out of Auckland.

Option B

- 89 This option allows Auckland to move down to Alert Level 2 and the rest of the country to return to Alert Level 1. I consider this a proportionate response to the risk following the measures taken to date because:
- 89.1 No new positive cases have been identified since 28 February 2021.
 - 89.2 All positive cases identified are contacts of the recent community cases and are either recovered or in self-isolation, with their close contacts already contacted or in self-isolation.
 - 89.3 All but 11 remaining (minus any new expected cases) Papatoetoe High School students, volunteers and staff have tested negative. Close contacts at the school must return two negative tests and go through 14 days isolation before they can return to school.
 - 89.4 We are confident that we have identified the perimeter of the outbreak and that the cluster is contained and that we can manage the tail through identifying, testing and isolating any contacts.
- 90 The rest of New Zealand returning to Alert Level 1 reflects our confidence that it is very unlikely there are undetected cases in the community outside of Auckland both generally and connected to the current cluster. While Level 2 allows most economic activity to take place it has also seen the widespread cancellation of events which has a significant effect in some sectors and regions.

Trade-offs and choices

- 91 Option A maintains the precautionary approach currently in place outside of Auckland while giving us more time to fully understand the extent of the outbreak. Option B has a lower economic and social cost, however, is riskier if the cluster is not under control and there is a need for further alert level increases again in the near future.
- 92 Given the lack of community transmission and rate of testing to date, Option B has been recommended by the Director-General in his interim advice.

Timing

- 93 The change to Alert Level could come into effect at either:
- 93.1 6:00am on Saturday 6 March; or
 - 93.2 6:00am on Sunday 7 March (Director-General of Health's recommendation); or

93.3 11:59pm on Sunday 7 March.

Alert Level boundary

- 94 Under both options the Alert Level boundary in the current Order would continue. However, if Auckland moved to Alert Level 2 and the rest of the country to Alert Level 1 (Option B) there would be no checkpoints as there would be no prohibition on cross-boundary travel under that option.
- 95 If Cabinet agrees to Option A, officials propose the categories of permitted movement across the Alert Level boundary under the current settings are preserved.

Ability to operationalise the proposals in this paper

- 96 We are well placed to implement all of the options presented in this paper.
- 97 Under both Options A and B the current Alert Level boundary would continue (under Option B there would be no prohibition on cross boundary travel). In terms of checkpoints the necessary mechanisms and resourcing is already in place. More generally, compliance and welfare support processes are in place and working well. As noted above, support is being provided to/through ARPHS and/to ethnic community leaders to vulnerable communities are getting the necessary support. Work is also underway to simplify and clarify how communities can access support for communities and achieve better inter-agency coordination.
- 98 There has been huge demand for Healthline services over the past week in part due to confusion caused by the additional categories of contacts that have recently been introduced. Officials are working to clarify advice – especially regarding self-isolation following testing.

Financial Implications

- 99 Imposing Alert Level controls reduces economic activity as discussed above and this will impact on tax revenues.

Legislative Implications

- 100 I will make or amend an Order under section 11 of the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 informed by Cabinet's decision.
- 101 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.
- 102 Additionally, Ministerial consultation requirements will be satisfied through previous consultation on template Orders for Alert Level requirements and the proposals outlined in this paper.

- 103 The Act requires that there be 48 hours between publishing the Order and its coming into force. This requirement does not apply when an Order only removes or reduces requirements. Any decisions to add requirements beyond the current template orders will take more time.

Impact Analysis

- 104 The Treasury has determined that the regulatory proposals in this paper are exempt from the requirement to provide a Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) 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

- 105 The human rights implications of the controls in place to slow the spread of COVID-19 are significant and have been set out in detail in previous papers on Alert Level decisions [CAB-20-MIN-0161, CAB-20-MIN-0176].
- 106 Relevant departments and the Solicitor-General will continue to keep any remaining restrictive measures under review to ensure that they remain necessary and are implemented in a way that is consistent with the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act.

Population impacts

- 107 Population impacts are discussed in paragraphs 57-63.

Consultation

- 108 This paper was prepared by the COVID-19 Group in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The Ministry of Health has 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 Treasury; NZ Police; Ministries of Social Development; Business, Innovation and Employment; Transport, and Pacific Peoples; Waka Kotahi and the Office of Ethnic Communities have provided input into relevant parts of the paper. Further agency consultation has not been possible in the timeframe.

Communications

- 109 The Prime Minister will communicate the decisions set out in this paper after Cabinet agreement. Communications will be co-ordinated with the Government's broader communications around its COVID-19 response. This will include Chinese language communication channels.
- 110 When a decision is taken to move alert levels, it is important to provide early notification to international partners who may be affected by, and who may have some effect on the successful implementation of, such a change. Jurisdictions with whom New Zealand currently has, or is negotiating, one- or two-way quarantine-free travel arrangements (Australia, Cook Islands, Niue) require notification to inform their health and border decision-making and provide

certainty to travellers. Foreign diplomatic and consular representatives based in, or accredited to, New Zealand require notification to allow the continuation of consular support to foreign nationals currently in New Zealand, which can help amplify (and translate) government messaging. Other international partners may experience particular impacts related to special arrangements (e.g. medical evacuation from the Pacific; travel to/from Antarctica).

Proactive Release

111 I intend to proactively release this Cabinet paper following Cabinet consideration.

Recommendations

The Minister for COVID-19 Response recommends that Cabinet:

- 1 note that on 27 February Cabinet agreed moving Auckland to Alert Level 3 and the rest of the country to Alert Level 2 was an appropriate public health measure to respond to the risks of the outbreak or spread of COVID-19;
- 2 note there was one further related positive case on 28 February;
- 3 note that based on the evidence available to date, the Ministry of Health considers there is no evidence of community transmission and the cluster is under control;
- 4 note the Director-General will provide updated advice at the time a decision is made;

Options

- 5 agree that one of the following options is an appropriate measure in response to the level of public health risk:

EITHER

- 5.1 Option A: Keep Auckland at Alert Level 3 and move the rest of country to Alert Level 1;

OR

- 5.2 Option B: Move Auckland to Alert Level 2 and the rest of the country to Alert Level 1 (Minister's and Director-General of Health's recommended option);

- 6 agree that the changes to Alert Level in recommendation 5 take effect from:

EITHER

- 6.1 6:00am on Saturday 6 March;

OR

6.2 6:00am on Sunday 7 March (Director-General of Health's recommended option);

OR

6.3 11:59pm on Sunday 7 March;

7 agree that Cabinet will next review Alert Levels on Friday 12 March;

8 agree that the under recommendation 5.1 and 5.2 the Alert Level boundary will remain the same as it is under the current COVID-19 Public Health Response (Alert Level Requirements) Order (No 4) 2021, and that the categories of permitted movement across the Alert Level boundary in that Order will be continued if Cabinet agrees to recommendation 5.1;

Face coverings on public transport

9 agree the current requirement for face coverings on public transport throughout New Zealand is an appropriate measure in response to the level of public health risk and it be continued in the Order giving effect to the decision in recommendation 5 above;

Other matters

10 agree that once a decision is made to change Alert Levels, officials provide advance notice to international partners including (but not restricted to): Australia, the Cook Islands, and Niue; and those foreign diplomatic and consular staff based in, or accredited to, New Zealand;

11 note that officials will provide the Minister of COVID-19 Response with advice on how to increase behaviours that support fast and accurate contact tracing this week;

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

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response