

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 20 APRIL 2020

PM: Tēnā koutou katoa. Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou. Over the past few weeks, I've often used my time at this podium to acknowledge the people on the front line. Today I want to remember the people in New Zealand who have lost someone to COVID-19, or the many more who had the terror of almost losing someone. Throughout this pandemic there have been individuals who I have tracked the progress of. I didn't know their names, but I knew their status, and I still get a phone call for every individual person that we lose to COVID-19 in New Zealand.

We may be amongst a small number of countries where that is still able to happen, where the numbers we have lost have been small. But we cannot forget that every number is someone's father, someone's mum, a relative, or a friend, and someone that we have all been united in an effort to protect and to save. And that is why we, as a country, took on the challenge of staring down COVID-19, because we believe that decisive action, going hard and going early, gave us the very best chance of stamping out the virus—and it has.

We have done what very few countries have been able to do. We have stopped a wave of devastation. Our transmission rate—that is, the number of cases that each person with the virus passes it on to—is now 0.48, less than half a person each. Overseas, the average is 2.5 people. We have amongst the lowest number of confirmed cases per 100,000 people in the world. We have a relatively low proportion of serious cases and, according to the Oxford University Coronavirus Government Response Tracker, one of the lowest mortality rates in the world. Nearly every case identified since April 1 is primarily as a result of overseas travel, or contact with someone with the virus, and often in existing clusters. The number of individual cases that we don't have an obvious connection in that period now stands at only eight.

Our testing has scaled up and we have now tested over 85,000 New Zealanders, one of the highest testing rates per capita in the world. In the last few days, we expanded testing to include random testing in Queenstown, the Waikato, Canterbury, and Auckland. We have tested over a thousand people this way and so far have produced not a single positive result. The Director-General of Health is confident that there is currently no widespread undetected community transmission in New Zealand. In short, the effort of our team of 5 million has broken the chain of transmission and taken a quantum leap forward in our goal to eliminate the virus.

Elimination doesn't mean zero cases; it means zero tolerance for cases. It means when a case emerges—and it will—we test, we contact trace, we isolate, and we do that every single time with the ambition that when we see COVID, we eliminate it. That is how we will keep our transmission rate under 1, and it is how we will keep succeeding—and we have seen success. You—all of you—have stopped the uncontrolled explosion of COVID-19 in New Zealand, and I couldn't feel prouder of the start that we have made together. But I also feel a huge responsibility to ensure that we do not lose any of the gains that we have made either.

On that basis, New Zealand will move out of alert level 4 lockdown at 11.59 p.m. on Monday April 27, one week from today. We will then hold at alert level 3 for two weeks, before reviewing how we are tracking again, and making further decisions at Cabinet on 11 May. In making this decision, Cabinet discussed in depth all of the data we have shared with all of you daily. We looked at the gains we have made in our results, but also our systems. We considered that the longer we are in lockdown, the less likely it is we will need to go back.

We also considered moving alert levels on 23 April, which is in just 48 hours' time. The sacrifice made to date has been huge, and Cabinet wanted to make sure we lock in our gains and give ourselves some additional certainty. Waiting to move alert levels next week

costs us just two more business days but gives us much greater long-term health and economic returns down the track. It means we are less likely to have to go backwards. Ultimately, we have taken a balanced approach and one that the Director-General of Health not only supported, but also recommended. This time we now have will be used to prepare, on all fronts.

This week, businesses will be allowed to get ready to open—such as employers re-entering premises to receive stock if necessary—but we ask that, in doing so, they stick to social distancing and their bubbles. This is not an early move out of alerts; it is merely a matter of preparation.

Same principle applies for preparing schools and the education system. Schools and early learning centres can be accessed this week for cleaning, maintenance, and any other preparations. The current plan is for schools to be able to reopen for a teacher-only day on 28 April as part of their preparation, and we expect those who need to attend to be able to from 29 April. I do want to caution, it may take a bit longer for some schools and early learning centres to be ready, and the Minister of Education will continue to work alongside the education sector in those preparations.

And from a health perspective, this week testing will continue, including giving ongoing public confidence that we are reaching isolated, rural, Māori, and Pacific communities. Contact tracing will be bolstered even further, and we'll continue to use the best evidence, advice, and modelling we have to make daily decisions to serve New Zealanders.

The most important thing to remember in the meantime, though, is that all of this preparation takes us to an alert level in one week's time—a recovery room of sorts—that has many restrictions. Yes, alert level 3 allows more economic activity like construction, manufacturing, and forestry, but it does not allow more social activity—and for good reason. If we want to make sure that we are a health success story and ensure our economy can start to operate again without the virus taking off, we need to get this next phase right. The worst thing we can do for our country is to yo-yo between levels, with all of the uncertainty that this will bring. We need to move with confidence, and that does mean following the rules.

So here is a reminder of the principles for level 3 when we get there. One: stay home. If you are not at work, school, exercising, or getting essentials, then you must be at home—the same as alert level 4. Two: work and learn from home if you can. We still want the vast majority of people working from home and children and young people learning from home. At-risk students and staff should also stay at home, and they will be supported to do so. Early learning centres and schools will physically be open for up to year 10 families that need them. Three: make your business COVID-19 safe. COVID-19 has spread in workplaces, so the quid pro quo of being able to open is doing it in a way that doesn't spread the virus. Important industries like construction, manufacturing, forestry will be open, as will retail as long as it is contactless.

Four: stay regional. You can exercise at parks or beaches within your region, but the closer to home the better. Activities must be safe, keep 2 metres away from anyone not in your bubble, and make minimal trips. Five: keep your bubble as small as possible. If you need to, at level 3 you can expand your bubble a small amount to bring in close family, isolated people, or caregivers. Six: wash your hands often with soap, then dry them. Cough and sneeze into your elbow. And seven:—and this is a really important one—if you're sick, stay at home, get advice from the GP or Healthline about getting a test, and quickly. I cannot emphasise this enough.

All of our success in contact tracing and isolation relies on knowing as soon as we can when you are unwell. There is no stigma to COVID-19. We will only be successful if everyone is willing to play their part in finding it wherever it is.

These rules will be so important. We all want to continue to progress down the levels. The best hope of getting back to normal as soon as possible is never getting ahead of where we

are right now. So to recap to anyone just tuning in, we are currently in lockdown and are staying there for the next week. From Tuesday morning 28 April, we will move to level 3 and stay there for two weeks. Those two weeks gives us another cycle of transmission to assess how we are doing. From there, we will move if we can and if we're ready, but only when we're ready and only when it's safe.

And so this weekend—Anzac weekend—enjoy the company of your bubble, stay local, reflect on the amazing sacrifices of our forebears. Decades ago they came together in the most testing of circumstances, half a world away, and helped forge who we are today. It was a very, very different battle than the one we are in now, but the character of who we are as a country remains exactly the same. So please, stay strong, stay home, be kind, and let's finish what we started. I'll now hand over to Dr Bloomfield.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Thank you, Prime Minister. Kia ora koutou katoa. I just want to comment briefly today on the work over recent weeks on testing and contact tracing, given the significance of both of these for supporting our move to level 3. These are two areas of the public health response that we have scaled significantly over the last two months. Early on, we worked hard to ensure New Zealand implemented its own testing capability, and we have scaled that up significantly week on week, while improving our supply lines for testing kits. This has supported our high testing rates that the Prime Minister referred to, and these are now amongst the highest in the world.

In the coming weeks we will continue to focus on testing people with symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 and hunting out any undetected cases that might exist. We will continue to undertake community and other sentinel testing as part of our ongoing surveillance. We will also be stepping up our testing on asymptomatic workers in facilities where there have been recent cases, including in healthcare settings, essential businesses, and tourist industry groups, and also proactively testing contacts of new cases where indicated, regardless of symptoms. This will include household, workplace, and social contacts.

Equally, contact tracing was one of the first things that we started to scale up, including creating a national service with more than 200 staff who have had the sole focus of tracking down close contacts of confirmed and probable cases. Essentially, what we are doing here is transforming what was a very local, manual process into a national, automated system with scale. This is the first time this has been done in New Zealand, and I am proud of what the team has achieved over the last month.

To ensure we are heading in the right direction, I asked Dr Ayesha Verrall to come in and independently review our approach. Dr Verrall has provided a report with very constructive feedback and guidance on how to further build our contact tracing capability and capacity to ensure it achieves our aspiration of gold standard. Her report is being publicly released this afternoon, now that it has been considered by Cabinet, and I will continue to update you on progress with implementing the recommendations. A number of those recommendations have already been put in place or responded to, and work continues apace on the others.

Thank you, Prime Minister.

PM: All right. Thank you. Happy to take questions.

Media: What do you say to someone sitting at home watching this who's done a hard slog for four weeks and is now being asked to do a whole other week? Haven't we made it? Haven't we got across the line?

PM: My message to New Zealanders is you have sacrificed too much for us to lose those gains now. Let's lock them in, make sure we do everything we can not to go backwards, and keep moving forward successfully.

Media: Do you appreciate the big ask—

PM: Yes I do.

Media: —because, I mean, things like funerals, for example, no exceptions there?

PM: No. No changes there. Actually, just as I came down, I was shown an email from someone who had lost a loved one who said that they were one of the families who have been affected by the funeral arrangements, but to reinforce not to change them. Now that to me is the extraordinary courage of New Zealanders who, in spite of feeling so acutely the sacrifices that they're making, believe in the mission that we have together, and that's the kind of message that reminds me that we are doing the right thing together.

Media: And when weighing up the sacrifices for either decision, how hard was this decision to make?

PM: Every point along the way, we are having to, of course, make sure that we are looking at the health impacts and also the economic impacts. But, thankfully for New Zealanders, both point to the same path: fight the virus, save lives, and save livelihoods. So this decision has really fallen into place based on all of the evidence, the modelling, the research, and the advice. And we have agreed with the recommendation from the Director-General of Health.

Media: And in the lead-up, did you think that we were actually going to move out of lockdown this week? Was that where your head was at last week?

PM: My view is I've always been willing to wait for the latest information and data we have to give us the best modelling we can and the best advice we can. So we only started considering that over the weekend when we had that information all in front of us so we could do it in real time. So New Zealanders have had the same data we have.

Media: How great is the risk that people will get too relaxed now? Because here we are pushing them that extra week, aren't we pushing them kind of to the brink of lockdown? So how concerned are you that they will get relaxed and stop being compliant?

PM: I don't think New Zealanders want to waste all the effort that they've put in already. And also, all of the evidence I've seen to date shows that New Zealanders have done an exceptional job, by and large, of sticking with what has been an extraordinary ask. Compared to the rest of the world, we've done something that I think is incredible.

Media: You've said that we'll lose two business days over the course of the week—

PM: That's relative to the decision of when the four weeks—yep.

Media: Sure. Sure. What kind of assessment was that in terms of the economic impact, the impact on businesses? And have you had any response from business about that time frame?

PM: And so the economic impact of those additional two days we had to weigh up against the additional certainty that it gives that we're less likely to have to return to level 4 down the track. And so, therefore, we get the greatest gains at the lowest cost by making the decision that we have.

Media: Are business days relevant, though, in this setting, because, for example, online services, they're not going to just be nine-to-five closing. So isn't it actually wider? Isn't it actually a week that businesses aren't trading, as opposed to two days?

PM: Yeah, and, of course, keeping in mind then, equally, from that online setting, people can start placing their orders now. The point at which businesses are filling those orders, obviously, we're waiting for them to resume activity next week. That doesn't stop New Zealanders from being able to engage in online commerce, and then, down the track, those orders being filled. But it does make a difference to us in the long term. We didn't take lightly the decision. An extra two business days, or waiting till next week, we know that's a big ask, and we didn't take it lightly. But because it gives us an extra certainty and reduces the likelihood that we will go back to level 4, we believed that that was a sacrifice worth making.

Media: It doesn't preclude us from going back to level 4 though, does it?

PM: No. And what precludes us going backwards is sticking with the rules as we go. And that's why we'll keep reinforcing: we remain in lockdown. At alert level 3, we continue to need vigilance—more so than ever—because that's when we'll have more people in contact with one another. But New Zealanders have proven themselves and they have done so in an incredible way. And so I have faith that we will keep doing that.

Media: But do you not trust New Zealanders to be responsible enough to move into level 3? Because as you've said, repeatedly, it's not that different from level 4, so do you not trust New Zealanders—

PM: Socially it's not—socially, level 3 is not much different to level 4, but economically it's quite different. We have much more economic activity going back at level 3 than we have now. So it is a big change, and that's why we need vigilance in every other part of people's lives.

Media: What's enforcement going to look like, particularly with the ramp-up of business activity, people being able to go out into their shops or warehouses? How is, actually, that going to be monitored to make sure that that is all being done safely? And are you moving, I suppose, to a level of higher trust?

PM: Yeah. Level 3 does come with higher trust and high expectations of New Zealanders not to lose that trust. We will still have police, of course, acting as enforcers. It will be very obvious if we have congregation in recreational areas. It will be very obvious if we have movement that really outstrips what we would expect for the kind of commerce we'll be engaging in. So people will still be asked questions when they're moving around. We will still have the police undertaking that job. But there is more trust at alert level 3.

Media: And I suppose, in the business thing, it's not so obvious necessarily. You know, there might be companies going back and you don't really know what's going inside. Again, are you just trusting people to do the right thing?

PM: And look, there's a lot of that at alert level 3, and there will be in preparation. But, of course, what we've heard is that in order for people to get started, some of them, just on their own, need access to their premises, so our view was that could be done safely and that we have faith in our operators to do that. But this is not an invitation to trade, to open, to restart; it is only an invitation to prepare.

Media: Do you have leeway to further extend level 4 if there is a significant development in the next week, and what conditions would that be?

PM: Yeah. I'll also hand over to Dr Bloomfield to also add here, but our results in the last week have been fairly consistent. You'll have seen today we've narrowed down only to, you know, one case where we're undertaking a bit more further investigation from what we had today. With those numbers that's given us the confidence to move. Over the next week, we expect further confidence again. And so I'm not expecting any surprises, particularly because of the proactive testing that's been under way. Dr Bloomfield, though.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes. Just one thing to add to that, Prime Minister. And one of the things about being in the lockdown sort of situation is even the cases that are coming through, and a number of the more recent ones, in recent days, have actually been people who were infected, it seems, and had symptoms before we even went into lockdown, and they have had residual symptoms, have now been tested, and are positive. But actually they have been within a bubble, and so the risk of further transmission is very, very low. And we've seen that reflected in the number of contacts for each case that is coming through, and our ability, very quickly, to identify, for the vast majority of them, what the source of their infection was.

Media: What's your plan to restart Parliament?

PM: That's something that the Business Committee has been discussing. My preference is, even though I know some of their draft plans, my preference is to still leave parliamentary business for the Business Committee to announce. What you will have

already heard me say is that Cabinet will mirror what it is that Parliament and that committee determines. You saw some insights into how they may choose to organise themselves, so the Speaker has already worked through what social distancing in the debating chamber looks like, how Parliament could operate with reduced attendance, and we, likewise, have mirrored that in working through the way that Cabinet and Cabinet committees. My intention is that Cabinet committees will resume under alert level 3, but we will use a mixture of face to face and distance, so that we can apply the same expectations we're putting across every workplace here in the Beehive.

Media: The finance Minister said last week that schools would have at least a week after the move down to level 3 before they would have to reopen. You seem to be giving them only two days by your proposal.

PM: No, so I think the intention has always been notice. We absolutely expect that there's a need for preparation and planning, and that's why you heard me speak today about giving access to schools, schools being able to, for instance, do any cleaning, do any movement of equipment within school grounds, do any maintenance work, and also that teacher-only day we're being specific about for Tuesday of next week. For some schools it may take some time thereafter. We're allowing, of course, the Ministry of Education to continue to work with the education sector, but we absolutely accept we do need to give notice, we do need to give time, and there does need to be preparation.

Media: The Early Childhood Council and a petition with 35,000 signatures from teachers both urge you to keep all ECEs and schools closed at level 3 because they won't be safe. What's made you determine that they are safe?

PM: I'll hand that to the Director-General. We're acting on his advice in the way we're operating within schools.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Thank you, Prime Minister. So this is one of the settings we looked very carefully at the international evidence, and the experience both in New Zealand and overseas with COVID-19 over the last few months shows that COVID-19 doesn't infect or affect children and teens in the same way as it does adults. So children and teens tend to have low infection rates, and they don't become as unwell if they do get infected, and they don't tend to pass the virus on to adults. So there are two key public health principles here. One is, first, minimising the risk that someone gets infected in the first place in level 3—hence maintaining the physical distancing and the strict measures in a whole range of settings—and secondly, of course, limiting the number of people or possible contacts that people have if they do get infected, to make it easier to prevent any further spread.

So, again, we had a look at alert level 3 approach in the ECE or school-based environment, and the advice and the approach is expressly designed to limit potential contacts that children and staff members and, therefore, families might have to someone who may be infected. So we're very confident that it's possible in alert level 3 to open up ECE and primary schools, especially with that—primary and middle schools—especially with that notice, so they can prepare ahead.

PM: Keeping in mind, of course, our underlying principle at alert level 3 is still that people work from home if they can and learn from home if they can. We want as many children and as many adults, if they're able to be, still at home. This is in those scenarios where that's not possible, so we are not expecting large numbers to be in attendance.

The second point to make is that, overall, at alert level 3, we're still expecting about an extra 400,000 New Zealanders to re-enter a workplace. We have a responsibility, be they people who are working in construction, be they people in manufacturing, or be they people in education, to do that as safely as possible, and that has been top of our mind when we've been designing the guidance and the decision around alert level 3.

Media: When you say it's only two business days, what do you say to the hospitality sector, who are losing another weekend and that's already a sector that's—

PM: Do you know what? My message to hospitality is that, actually, the best thing that we can do for them is to get back to normal life as soon as possible, and what we've traded here is that by staying in that extra bit of time, that gives us greater certainty that we can keep moving in the right direction. That's what hospitality needs, and I can tell you as the Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage, that is at the fore of my mind as well.

Media: Prime Minister, with schools, in terms of certainty for parents wanting a date, would you look at easing that message at all in level 3 and saying, "You're welcome to come back to school now if you want to.", or will parents have to wait till level 2 to be able to properly send their children back to school?

PM: No. At this point, alert level 3 is alert level 3, and that guidance will remain the same throughout. Obviously, we've said that we will be revising it after two weeks. That's an acknowledgment that alert level 3 is still a very restrictive place to be, and for many people it won't feel a lot different to where we are now. It does open up, though, more parts of the economy, and that is a significant difference.

Media: Will it be up to schools to vet and decide which kids need to be back at school, or are you leaving that up to parents' good natures?

PM: Yeah. That is not a burden we wish to put on schools. When we said voluntary, of course, that was an indication to parents. We are asking them if they can keep their children at home to do so. It would be too much of a burden to ask schools to vet and make decisions about the personal needs of the families in their parent communities, so we are not asking them to do that, but we are asking parents to remember that the guidance is: if you can keep your children at home, you should keep them at home.

Media: On this two-week period, when will that decision be made on whether to move out of level 3 or not? Because that's a Monday. That could be Cabinet for that day, or—

PM: Yes, we're making it on the 11th.

Media: Right, so there won't be any lead-in time; it could be that night?

PM: We're making it on the 11th.

Media: Prime Minister, did you consider dropping the alert level for some regions on the Wednesday immediately—for example, Te Tai Rāwhiti, who rely heavily on forestry and would benefit economically significantly with those extra days but also have very few cases and are one of the safer regions? Did you consider dropping regions like that?

PM: Yeah. One of the safer regions but also one that I know is very much on board with our goal to eliminate COVID. Yes, we did consider a regional approach, and that is not something that we have ruled out in the future, but our view now was that on the data and the analysis and the modelling we had, we were best at this point to stick together as a nation.

One of the things that has also struck me—and perhaps Dr Bloomfield might like to comment on this as well—is some of the cases we've had, in their history prior to lockdown, there has been a lot of movement around the country. We are a people who move between our regions, and so that's been top of our mind when we've been thinking about the approach we take. A case might emerge in one part of the country, but it might have come from somewhere else. Is there anything you want to add on that?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes, just to pick up on that point, Prime Minister. So we were, both the Prime Minister and I were worried about one of the cases reported today, which is in Northland. As it transpires, this is one of those cases where it was travel to Auckland—actually, before the lockdown—that was where the likely source of infection was, which is reassuring. But this is, I think, one of the important features, again, of level 3, is to stop that travel between regions, except where it's necessary to keep the flow of goods going.

PM: I think important to also add on that Northland case, I think, might have picked it up in March. So for anyone who has concerns about then the wider community, that's essentially less likely, because of that transmission date, but it proves a point.

Media: Prime Minister, was Cabinet unanimous in today's decision?

PM: There was consensus. There were a range of views shared, but there was consensus around this decision.

Media: What level will domestic flights and stuff start going back to normal?

PM: So, essentially, alert level 3 maintains the same expectations around domestic flights, and so it's only once you get further down the alert levels that you start seeing different provisions for domestic aviation.

Media: To what extent did New Zealand's contact-tracing capabilities factor into Cabinet's decision?

PM: Our contact-tracing abilities?

Media: Yeah.

PM: As I said yesterday, we had to factor in a whole range of issues around our systems and processes, and I outlined, in the beginning, our current take on how they're operating. You'll see, from announcements we're making today, we continue to put additional resource into continuing to scale up our contact tracing, which has happened over the last four weeks. We've put in an additional \$15 million already. We've scaled up the FTE capacity considerably. We're putting capacity to do that even further again, with surge capacity up to 300 FTEs, and an additional \$55 million put aside for us to continue to build a gold standard contact-tracing system, the likes of which New Zealand has never seen before.

Media: Maybe for Dr Bloomfield: how many contacts do we have the ability to trace per day right now?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Right now, with our national contact tracing centre, we can trace up to 5,000—

PM: Calls per day.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes. Contacts per day.

Media: And you're confident that's enough if we did, you know, heaven forbid, things got out of control down the line?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: We're going to continue to build our capacity. What we want to be able to do is to be able to scale up rapidly, even more if we need to. Having that all on a single electronic and linked platform across the country will enable that to happen. It means we can link in our public health units to our nationally based people, and we can also, like Healthline does, even use people doing those calls who are actually based at home and working off an electronic platform.

Media: Did the doubling of the community transmission from 2 percent to 4 percent—was that a factor in your recommendation to Cabinet to stay in level 4?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Actually, the cases ascribed to, or concluded to be, community transmission has continued to drop, especially over these last three weeks.

PM: So you'll hear every day we've been talking in a little bit more detail around the cases that we're still trying to locate their connection, and at the moment, in the last two weeks, we've talked about a total—or sorry, 1 April, it's been a total of 9 cases. So, incredibly low and confidence around the way those cases have been dealt with.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, can you please give us a little bit more detail about Dr Verrall's findings about contact tracing and where that—I suppose, what confidence or not that that gave you.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Look, I think, in summary—and the report will be made available so you can read it for yourself—I think Dr Verrall was complimentary about the work that was being done. She was confident that the direction of travel was good, that the model that was being implemented was good, and she gave some recommendations about how that could be further strengthened, including—and her very first recommendation was investment in the public health units, and this is what the Prime Minister has just alluded to, is this further investment in public health units. And she also proposed a suite of indicators whereby we might measure performance as this evolves into a national service, so that we would know we were not just delivering contact tracing but that we were delivering it in a way that was going to actually support our efforts to stamp out COVID-19.

Media: Did she identify any weaknesses or gaps that would really be a cause for concern as we move into level 3 and then, potentially, level 2?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I would say that she identified that the need to move the system from a local, very manual process to a national and electronic one was what was needed to address, you know, what you might call a range of small gaps and areas for improvement. So you will see that, I think, when you see the report.

PM: And that will be going out very shortly, I think, is my understanding.

Media: Prime Minister, the Government has had to nationalise PPE distribution, it's had to nationalise contact tracing—how much has this changed your mind around whether DHBs are too siloed, too localised?

PM: Yeah. Look, I think it's fair to say that it has given me insights into the parts of the health system that otherwise, frankly, are under-appreciated. And I have to say that there's a flip side. It's not just that we've seen, actually, where there may be greater benefit to a bit more coordination, but, equally, there would be greater benefit for us all recognising the parts of the health system that do an incredible job day in, day out and that we may not always see. So it's had that dual effect for me. The Heather Simpson report, obviously, asks and answers some of those questions. We decided, of course, that we wanted to allow ourselves the time and the space to deal with the pandemic we have in front of us before considering some larger, wider-scale health system reforms. I think that's the right decision. I don't think it would be right to plough into that when we're right in the middle of managing a global pandemic.

Media: How much of a sway did your trust in New Zealanders not to leave their bubbles this Anzac weekend play in making this decision?

PM: I actually hope what you've heard me express is a high degree of trust and confidence in New Zealanders, and that's comparative to, actually, to other parts of the world, where if you look at that Google tracking and some of the analysis out there, and our results, they've all been achieved because of the actions of New Zealanders. So when I read out those results, yes, our front-line health workers, our public health workers, our testing has all played a role, but so have New Zealanders, and so that's why I have trust and confidence.

Media: But breaches did go up over the Easter long weekend, so you would've expected that there would've been a flare-up or, perhaps, additional spread over Anzac?

PM: But additionally, what I think we also need to take into account is the length of time people have also been in lockdown, and I think that plays a role, not just what might otherwise be public holidays. So actually, our thinking here, as I've said, was that for that small additional bit of time, we get huge gains from a health perspective, and in the longer term and economic perspective, if we don't have to go back to lockdown.

Media: Just on the healthcare system. Is it accurate to, I guess, frame it as, sort of, first-world healthcare but a third-world system for delivering it—is that an accurate reflection? Has it taken this, an epidemic, to actually acknowledge how bad the system is?

PM: I think that's crude, and I think that does a disservice to, actually, to our workforce as well, who's not just working within the system but have helped build responses quickly and effectively. So, look, yes, you've asked some questions about centralisation and decentralisation, but keep in mind, even for our contact tracing, we need people on the ground with local knowledge, who know their local community, and that is particularly important for public health. So yes, we want greater national support of that, but we must always keep that local knowledge and expertise as well. So I don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves here. There's more work to be done, and we've always said our health system needs to be rebuilt, but I'm not going to rebuild it in the middle of a pandemic.

Media: But are we behind countries like Australia when it comes to that nationalised approach? I mean, are we, basically, having to speed up?

PM: I'll again let Dr Bloomfield's facial expressions answer that question.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Look, I think we just have a different system from Australia, recalling that they have the Commonwealth and the state system. So in my discussions with counterparts in Australia, they often look with envy to New Zealand, in particular the fact that our primary care is much more integrated at a local level, so we have much better integration between primary and secondary care, and the opportunities afforded by our local alliances and similar arrangements. I think that Australia looks to us with envy—probably, I think, both do, and we also look further afield just to learn from each other's systems and try and take the best of each other's.

Media: In terms of what you've said, though, previously, we've had to create a national system, haven't we? So we haven't had one, have we?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: This is very specific to our public health services. So we have our 12 public health units around the country. Some look after the public health function for more than one district health board, and whilst there is a national component to that, for example, we contract directly from the ministry with those public health units and the medical officers of health are designated by myself, there is still—a bit like our district health boards, they do tend to be contained within their region and deliver services for their region. What this has shown is that there is both a need and value in having that local and regional capability and capacity linked much more and integrated much more strongly at a national level.

PM: I do think it's important to recognise that until, you know, really, the beginning of the year, these services were used for TB, measles, you know, on a relatively infrequent basis—to then, suddenly, have to scale up for a service that could operate nationally in a global pandemic. So, yes, there has been areas where we've needed to boost resource, capability, build a national system of collating information across regions. We've had to do that very, very quickly, and that has meant there's been more work to do. But when you think about what we usually have to do with these services and the additional layer that we've asked them to contend with, their response has been incredible. There is more to do, though, and we're all very, very open about that.

Media: Prime Minister, just on the elimination target, you say this doesn't mean zero cases. Does this mean you're prepared, or, at least, expecting, to have the virus in the country until there's a vaccine?

PM: Look, I do, again, think there's a big difference between the notion of just suppression, where you accept, almost, the existence of COVID-19, and New Zealand's strategy, which has been this ongoing campaign of elimination. But, of course, the reason I wanted to give that explanation is when you hear the word elimination, you think "gone for ever". And I don't want New Zealanders to think that when they see a case, that means we failed; it doesn't. It means zero tolerance. So every time we see a case, we basically pounce on it. We do everything we can, then, to shut it down and to eliminate it when it arises, and we will have to keep doing that on an ongoing basis—and, yes, until a vaccine arises.

Media: Can I return to the question of the regions. I think there's so few cases now—I think 14 in the last four days. There are going to be regions in New Zealand that haven't had a case in a week or so. And you're going to have cries from those regions to re-open or go to level 2. Are you open to doing that, or is that just a closed shop until 11 May?

PM: No, the decision we've made today is for all of New Zealand. We haven't ruled out in the future circumstances where we may take on regional variation, but we haven't adopted it in this instance.

Media: Prime Minister, a couple for other newsrooms, if that's all right—firstly, our sports department: at what alert level are contact sports likely to be able to resume training again?

PM: Yeah. We're doing further work at the moment—that is primarily applicable to alert level 2.

Media: OK, and Australia's forcing tech giants like Google and Facebook to pay local media companies for their content. Will you follow suit?

PM: To pay local media companies for their content—I haven't seen that announcement; I'll look in a little more detail. I would, again, remind—just give the example, though, in recent times, our COVID-19 advertising campaign has predominantly gone through and had the biggest proportion of spend with our mainstream media rather than alternates like Facebook and online services.

Media: Given that Facebook is sharing local media content, though, and it's picking up a big share of that advertising revenue, should those tech giants be paying a kind of dividend of that—

PM: Of course, we've had the debate about digital services taxation—that's something we consulted on; it's not something we've made any decisions on. But you will remember that as a Government, this is a question that we have asked the public and sought their feedback.

Media: Prime Minister, in a week's time, we go to level 3, what will you be looking for in that two weeks at level 3—what sort of indicators will you be looking for to enable you to go to level 2?

PM: Again, New Zealanders will be looking at the same things we will be. Again, what's happening with our case numbers, what those case numbers tell us—the story that they tell us about transmission, and where they're happening. So, again, we'll be sharing that data in real time. And, also, we'll continue to be looking at keeping our testing up, keeping that positivity rate low—so for a big number of tests, just a small number of positives—and making sure we get that good geographic spread.

Media: Where would those case—

PM: Dr Bloomfield, would you like to share your—

Media: Yeah, where would those case numbers need to be?

PM: I'll just let Dr Bloomfield just add, as well.

Bloomfield: So I think those are the main features. We'll be wanting, on a daily basis, as we have been doing, to really understand, if we're getting cases, where they are and how we got them, and then, as the Prime Minister said, you know, that really strong “stamp it out” posture. So that will be really critical to giving us confidence that the level 3 measures are working.

And I think, also—and the Prime Minister's alluded to this—we need to be even more vigilant in level 3 than in level 4, because we don't have the protection of the full lockdown scenario, and so we'll be wanting to see that New Zealanders are maintaining those really critical behaviours that will help protect us and help keep those chains of transmission broken, really, and that is particularly around physical distancing, so that will, I think, be critical also to our advice about whether or not to move further beyond alert level 3.

PM: I'm aware that many of you have deadlines for filing, so I'll just take two more questions, if I may.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, the NHI—what proportion of New Zealanders does it have up-to-date contact details for, and is it enough?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Very high now, I would—I won't guess, other than to say it's well over 95 percent, and the reason for that is we now have a national electronic enrolment service through our primary care, and one of our best ways to get up-to-date contact details for people is when they enrol through their general practitioner with the PHO. And that is updated—a file is sent—every month into the Ministry of Health and the information, any updates, on address information goes into the NHI at that time, so it's very contemporary.

Media: Did Cabinet do exactly what you asked them to today? Did Cabinet do exactly what you recommended, or was it not?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I'll have to defer to the Prime Minister on that?

PM: Dr Bloomfield wasn't part of the Cabinet decision, but I can tell you, in writing, he gave us the advice that we do exactly what we have announced today.

Media: Prime Minister, there are some concerns from principals and teachers that, at level 3, "work from home if you can" means that those who can't are more likely blue-collar workers, they will have to send their children to ECE, to schools. What is your message to those principals and teachers?

PM: Sorry, you'll have to explain to me what the difference is therefore?

Media: That they will have to send their kids to school?

PM: Yes. I mean, ultimately, we are asking parents who can work from home to work from home, and yes there will be certain types, then, of workforces that are more able to work from home that can't. But I think we also need to keep in mind that there have been hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders who are in our essential workforces, including people who are delivering our goods and services and people who are sitting on the checkouts at supermarkets, who have continued to work for us, and now they will be joined by others. I consider, therefore, our teachers part of that critical workforce, and I do believe that we can, of course, focus on their health and safety as well, as well the children, which should be a smaller number than what they are used to, to be able to create bubbles of safety within a schooling environment to the best of our ability.

Media: Because you've extended the lockdown, and therefore the amount of time that businesses, some businesses, will have no cashflow, will you extend the wage subsidy scheme?

PM: No. Keeping in mind the wage subsidy scheme was for a 12 week period, which of course is well beyond what our alert level 4, and even—

Media: So that'll be no?

PM: No, so alert level 4 obviously has gone for four weeks, and then we'll be going through to those additional few days, and then even with the extra two of level 3, that's still well below the 12 weeks' worth which the wage subsidy was the value of.

Media: Just in terms of your remarks yesterday about public attitudes being part of the consideration, what actually got brought to the Cabinet table around that? I mean, have you effectively been doing, sort of, Zoom focus groups and polling around this? How do you weigh that?

PM: Oh, and that's a very good question. That's very difficult, but one of the things that you look for, of course, is the level of compliance, that obviously if people are feeling like they've been asked to do something that is in keeping with what's required to protect New Zealand, then you're more likely to see that compliance. And I think what you can see from the data we do have, from things like Google tracking, for instance, that they've made

publicly available, is that New Zealanders' compliance has been really high, and I take that as a sign that they can see the value of what we're doing. You only have to look overseas to see why this is so important.

OK, thank you everyone.

conclusion of press conference