

**MINISTER OF FINANCE AND DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH PRESS CONFERENCE:
FRIDAY, 1 MAY 2020**

Hon Grant Robertson: Kia ora. Ana mea nui ki a koutou katoa. Nau mai haere mai ki tēnei hui. Greetings everybody. Welcome to Friday's press conference: day four of alert level 3. I will hand over first to the Director of Public Health, Dr Caroline McElnay.

Dr Caroline McElnay: Thank you. Tēnā koutou katoa. Today, we have three new confirmed cases of COVID-19 to report. One case is linked to overseas travel, one is linked to a known case and is still being investigated, and one is still under investigation. This means our total confirmed cases is 1,132 and the total probable cases 347. That brings our current total of confirmed and probable cases in New Zealand to 1,479. I'm pleased to say that there are no new COVID-19 deaths to report.

Yesterday, our laboratories completed 5,328 tests, bringing the total number of tests completed to date to 139,898. We have 1,252 cases that are reported as having recovered from COVID-19, which is an increase of 11 from yesterday, and so 85 percent of all our confirmed and probable cases are considered to be recovered.

There are six people in hospital today, and none of those six are in intensive care. There are still 16 significant clusters. One has had no cases notified in a 28-day period, and that is considered to be closed. We expect to close another cluster tomorrow, and we have a further six clusters where the last case was reported between 14 and 28 days ago, so we expect to be able to close those off in the next few days.

I just want to talk about the press release which was issued by Waitematā earlier today. So Waitematā District Health Board this morning issued a media statement on three staff members who have tested positive for COVID-19. One of those was tested and was positive at the weekend, one was included in yesterday's tally, and one is included in today's count. The staff had worked on a ward where patients from St Margaret's Hospital and Rest Home were transferred due to staffing shortages at that facility. I have spoken to DHB deputy chief executive, Dr Andrew Brant, and he has assured me that they have taken all appropriate actions to minimise any potential risks to patients and staff.

The source of staff contracting COVID-19 remains under investigation. Full PPE was available and worn by staff at all times in the area where the St Margaret's patients are being cared for. A review is in progress to understand how and where the infection may have occurred.

Thank you.

Hon Grant Robertson: Thank you very much, Dr McElnay.

I want to cover three things today: around enforcement, the winter energy payment, and the small-business cash-flow loan scheme. Firstly, on enforcement: an update of our ongoing enforcement under alert level 3 rules. It is paramount that we do not lose our hard-won health gains as we move to reboot our economy. Today, I can update you that there have been a total of 281 breaches of the CDEM or Health Acts under alert level 3, and that's an increase of 96 in the past 24 hours. Of those 281, 77 people have been prosecuted—an increase of 31 in the past 24 hours—180 warnings have been issued—an increase of 61 in the past 24 hours—and there have been 24 youth referrals—an increase of four in the past 24 hours. There have been 2,064 police assurance patrols over the past two days, alongside 2,790 crime prevention patrols in neighbourhoods and business districts.

The increases in these numbers are an indication that the police are stepping up their enforcement response, and this will continue over the weekend.

I want to make it clear that most New Zealanders are indeed doing the right thing and that this is actually reflected in the number of people calling out those who are doing the wrong thing. There have been a total of 2,101 reports from members of the public at level 3: 991 of

those about businesses and 785 about individuals; 325 about mass gatherings. These are being followed up, and as we head into the weekend, there is a particular example that I want to highlight.

As part of these reports by members of the public, there has been an increase of reports about parties at residential addresses that clearly include people beyond that person's bubble. I have two clear messages for anyone considering that. First, cancel your plans now; secondly, be aware that the police will be particularly taking a dim view of this activity as part of their level 3 enforcement activity this weekend.

We know that events where there have been gatherings such as parties have been at the root of a number of our clusters. The virus has proven it will spread easily at events like this. Any uptick in cases as a result of parties will mean that we have to stay in level 3 longer. So, please: don't be an idiot. Stick to your bubble and everyone will be better off.

I want to mention the winter energy payment today. From today, this payment runs for four months, as it has since 2018. For this year, the Government has doubled the 2020 winter energy payment to support our older and lower-income New Zealanders. This year, it comes to \$1,400 for couples and \$900 for a single person. People will see this additional money in their next payment from MSD.

There's two reasons that we made the decision to double the payment. At a time when we're asking people to stay at home in their bubbles and keep well, our role is to provide support for our most vulnerable to stay warm and healthy and reduce any unnecessary burden on health services. We also know that those on lower incomes are more likely to spend that extra income on basic household needs, and so we know that this doubling of the winter energy payment will provide an immediate stimulus to local economies across the country as we are rebooting the economy.

Today, we are also announcing further measures as part of our significant support package for businesses to boost cash flow and protect jobs and incomes. To date, the Government has acted quickly to put in place business support such as the \$10.5 billion wage subsidy, the large package of business tax support, and the business finance guarantee scheme that we're delivering in partnership with the banks. We've also been making sure that this support gets out the door to our business, workers, and economy as soon as possible and, indeed, faster than in many other countries. Today, we are adding to that. We have announced that the Government will provide interest-free loans for a year for small and medium sized business impacted by COVID-19 to support their immediate cash-flow needs and meet fixed costs. Businesses with 50 or fewer employees will be able to apply to the Inland Revenue Department for loans from 12 May.

This is a 100 percent Government lending scheme to support our SMEs. We're backing these businesses because we know how important they are to our economy. We also know that our small and medium enterprises have not been able to access the support that they need from other sources.

The scheme will provide \$10,000 to every firm and, in addition, \$1,800 per equivalent full-time employee. The scheme has a maximum term of five years. Repayments of principal and interest are not required for the first two years. The interest rate will be 3 percent, but, as noted, the loans will be interest-free if they are paid back within a year. The eligibility criteria are the same as for the wage subsidy scheme, but businesses will also have to declare that they are a viable business and that they will use the money for core business operating costs. There will be an audit process, led by IRD.

This support is available to help more than 400,000 businesses who have 50 or fewer employees. It's designed to get immediate support and help to our smaller businesses to cover costs like rent and other bills. It sits alongside the business finance guarantee scheme that we put in place with banks for medium-sized businesses.

Today, I can also announce that we are making a number of updates to this scheme based on the feedback we have had. This includes removing the Government's requirement for a

general security agreement and making the scheme more flexible by not requiring customers to have drawn down all existing facilities before applying. We are considering further changes to that scheme as well, to ensure it plays its part in supporting our businesses.

Taken together, the wage subsidy, the business loan guarantee scheme, the significant packages of tax changes, and the support through the business loan scheme, we have a significant package to cushion the blow of COVID-19 for businesses to protect jobs and put New Zealand's economy on a footing to get going again off the back of the amazing work that New Zealanders have all done to stamp out COVID-19 and get a head-start for our economic recovery.

Finally, the Prime Minister in her press conferences this week has finished by talking about slices of Kiwi ingenuity that we're seeing in alert level 3 as we find new ways of working while making sure we stay on course for our health response. Today, I'd like to add one that's close to my heart as the Associate Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage.

Our arts sector has suffered an intense blow as we fight COVID-19, as have others around the world, seen through the cancellation and postponement of Cannes Festival or the New York Tribeca festival. So, this year in New Zealand, we are bringing our arthouse to your house. The New Zealand International Film Festival is this year presenting its programme online for the very first time. From 24 July to 2 August, the world-class curated programme of world and New Zealand films can be screened at home. The joy, inspiration, and connection these festivals bring us will be missed by many, but now we have a creative solution befitting of our culture sector, and one that is well worthy of our support.

Happy to take your questions.

Media: Dr McElnay, how can you take the word of the Waitematā DHB when they say that they're doing everything that they can to minimise infection when three staff members have been infected with the coronavirus?

Dr Caroline McElnay: So Waitematā DHB have given me some details today around the investigations that they're undertaking. They launched extensive investigations after the first case was reported. They have been doing a significant amount of testing of both staff and patients. The two further cases that have developed since then has added to that intensity of swabbing that is under way and their investigations are still in progress, and that includes patients as well as staff.

Media: [*Inaudible*] that didn't really answer the question, sorry—how can you take them at their word that they're doing everything they can to minimise infection when they have three staff members who have been infected?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Well, because they're investigating it thoroughly, and the staff who were infected—we still don't know the source of that infection, but the DHB has assured me that the staff were wearing PPE when they had any dealings with any of the COVID-19 residents who had been transferred to that ward.

Media: What roles were those staff in—are they flexi-nurses, perhaps, who were working between a ward that has COVID patients and other wards within the hospital?

Dr Caroline McElnay: I don't have the details of their exact roles that they had, but the DHB has investigated where they were working and what their possible contact was with any of the patients, and have ensured that PPE was worn. And, obviously, this is why they really need to investigate this fully to make sure that there are no possible breaches of any PPE—we really want that assurance.

Hon Grant Robertson: And just to be absolutely clear that, obviously, this is a hospital that's been dealing with the transferred patients from the St Margaret's rest home. We had assurances that the staff involved have all been wearing PPE, but this is why we have to continue to investigate these matters. But also be aware—as we've said a number

of times—that, unfortunately, PPE is not completely foolproof, and so we have to be taking extra vigilance. I'm sure that's the outcome we'll get.

Media: Why are these Government-backed loans necessary when we already have the business finance guarantee scheme? Is it the case that banks aren't getting money out the door fast enough?

Hon Grant Robertson: I think for small and medium enterprises, in particular, there are quite specific issues—I mean, many of the small businesses in New Zealand are actually based upon individuals. The capital that's in the business is actually being created off the back of perhaps their own house or their own savings, and those people can't always get the support that they need from a bank. So this is a scheme that's designed specifically for small and medium enterprises. We believe it's a scheme that will be welcomed because it will give instant access to cash flow—to the working capital that's needed to support these businesses through this situation. The business finance guarantee scheme: we are continuing, as I said, to tweak the criteria of that and to work with the banks to ensure that it does play its part. But when it comes to these SMEs, we think this kind of bespoke scheme delivered directly by the Government will mean that they'll get the cash flow they need. I'll just take a follow-up.

Media: The tourism industry is really keen for domestic travel to be included under level 2. Is that something the Government will relook at?

Hon Grant Robertson: As the Prime Minister said yesterday, we're still finalising what will happen under level 2 within some of those specific areas. Quite clearly, under level 2 we'd want to be limiting around things like mass gatherings, in particular, but we have to look again at the detail of what's required for travel—how we can make sure that that travel remains safe and doesn't become a vector for further infection. So that work's under way at the moment to see what can be done under level 2.

Media: Minister Robertson, why are there two different versions of the bill that passed yesterday—one with the loan scheme in it and one without—and why was the one with the loan scheme tabled when it wasn't announced in the press release?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah. So look, what happened yesterday was that the bill that was put out by the Parliamentary Counsel Office—and it was tabled in the House—was incorrect. The Parliamentary Counsel's office have apologised for that. It was always the intention of the Government to be able to bring this scheme forward, and all the legislation did was create the enabling framework for that. I think what's really important here is, today, we've got a scheme that will put money in the pockets of those small and medium enterprises to meet their fixed costs, and I'm sure they'll welcome that.

Media: So does that make you regret the speed which Parliament was working at? In essence, because of that small error by a small part of Parliament, Parliament has now passed the wrong piece of legislation.

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, I wouldn't actually characterise the legislation that way. This is something that we always intended to do; the legislation has simply created the enabling framework for that. But—to your initial point—look, there is a lot being done with a great deal of speed at the moment. From time to time, there'll be a mistake. This was a mistake—a genuine one—and the Parliamentary Counsel Office have apologised for that. The good news is that, actually, the scheme is getting out there now and getting money to the business people that need it.

Media: How will the IRD assess credit risks, and will the IRD be beefed up with more people to assess how viable these businesses are?

Hon Grant Robertson: We're certainly going to be providing more support to Inland Revenue to be able to deliver this scheme—I mean, clearly, obviously, Inland Revenue has a lot of information about businesses, and so it makes it reasonably easy for people to be

able to do those investigations. Everyone who applies for the scheme will have to declare that they are a viable business, and there will be an audit process that follows on from that.

Media: Over what time frame will this loan be available?

Hon Grant Robertson: So at this stage, our intention is to have the scheme open for one month for applications, but we will review that before the end of that month to see how the scheme is rolling out and whether there is a need for it to be available and open any longer than that.

Media: How much money have you put aside for it?

Hon Grant Robertson: Obviously, it will depend upon the number of businesses who apply for it. We've got around 400,000 small and medium enterprises in New Zealand and many of them have taken up the wage subsidy scheme, so the amount of money that we need will be dependent on that.

Go Jenna—yep.

Media: How high is the risk that small businesses will default on their loan?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, obviously, we would want to see as many small businesses as possible repay, but there is risk that for some of them, they may not be able to come through the other side of COVID-19 and be able to pay this debt. So we'll factor that into our calculations about what it is—what's the fiscal cost, as we would describe it. But we would be hopeful that many businesses will be able to pay us back.

Media: Are you comfortable taking on that amount of risk on behalf of small businesses?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, I think it's really important to get the balance right here. This is a loan scheme; people have to pay it back. It does have an interest rate attached to it—a 3 percent rate for the maximum term of five years—but if it's paid off in the first year, it's interest free. So I think we've got the balance right here between a scheme that will get money to those small and medium enterprises as quickly as possible but it's being delivered in a responsible way.

Newshub—yeah.

Media: What do you say to those businesses who may perhaps already have taken a loan with the bank and are now looking at these comfortable interest rates that the Government's offering and saying, "Gosh, I wish they had brought that out sooner so that I didn't already sign up for something that's going to cost me a lot more in the long run."?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, obviously those businesses will take the time to consider whether this scheme is one that they want to draw down upon and how that matches with any other debts that they might have, or whatever their needs are. But the scheme is available. As long as you can meet the criteria—which are, effectively, the same criteria as the wage subsidy scheme—along with you making a declaration that you are a viable business, then the scheme is open to those businesses, as it is for all other small and medium enterprises.

Media: Minister, is New Zealand going to support Taiwan's resumption as an observer member of the World Health Organization?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, that's a matter that I'd need to get some advice on from both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and from the Ministry of Health, so I can't answer that question for you today.

Media: Does New Zealand support Australia's call for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 and the WHO's response to it?

Hon Grant Robertson: Oh look, I think, like all nations, New Zealand is very focused on making sure we get our response right here in New Zealand—that we look after the people of New Zealand. We are very interested in the origins of COVID-19 because it helps explain to us what we need to do to respond to it.

Collette, yes. [*Interruption*] Collette, thanks. Thanks, Collette.

Media: Do Government agencies, ministries, health authorities, etc. have the freedom to make comments on COVID or respond to questions on COVID, or do they have to go via Ministers' offices?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, it will depend a lot on what the question is—I mean, if it's something that involves a Minister's office or a particular issue that a Minister has been commenting on, it would be the normal practice around information. We clearly have the "no surprises" policy that operates across Government, but you'd need to give me a specific example.

Media: So you wouldn't say that chief executives of, say, ministries are muzzled in any way from talking to the public about COVID?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, it will just be the normal arrangements that we have—I mean, obviously, you know, chief executives have responsibilities for their departments. You know from the work that you do normally that it's Ministers who generally front to the media about particular issues. It'll very much depend on the circumstances of the issue.

Media: Will domestic tourism be allowed under alert level 2?

Hon Grant Robertson: As I just said before, we are looking again at alert level 2 and the rules that sit behind that. We want to make sure that we continue to balance the importance of public health with getting the economy going again, and Cabinet will be making its decisions about that over the coming week.

Media: Minister, tourism operators say without it, thousands of jobs will be lost. If they can operate safely, why shouldn't they be able to cater to domestic tourists?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, that's the very point—is we need to make sure that whatever happens is done safely and upholds the public health guidelines of alert level 2. The work that Cabinet's now going through is to assess what can and can't happen in detail under alert level 2, and we'll have a lot more to say about that next week.

Media: What is it, then, at the high level? Because the existing advice was avoid all non-essential travel that's inter-regional, but these guys are calling out for domestic tourism. You guys heard it firsthand before we went into lockdown, and you've been hearing it throughout—so [*Inaudible*] a bit of certainty and clarity.

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, exactly. That's what we will provide—that certainty and clarity—as we work through the detail of what alert level 2 looks like. We do know that travel has been an issue in terms of transmission of the virus, and so we have to make decisions that uphold our public health guidelines. But we absolutely understand that for domestic tourism, particularly, that's the lifeline for the tourism industry. We'll be making those decisions over the coming weeks.

Yes, down the front.

Media: Sorry, just to follow from Tova's question there—so does that mean that there'll be more—so the rules around alert level 2 will be released next week to give businesses more of an idea of what's coming?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, just as we've done as we moved towards alert level 3, we spent a lot of time as a Government getting exact clarity on what the rules will be at alert level 3; we need to do the same thing for alert level 2. We've put out high-level guidance, but, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, we're reviewing that guidance to make sure that it both meets our public health guidelines and allows economic activity to the extent that we possibly can. Those decisions will be made and announced in the very near future.

Media: Minister, is New Zealand going to see any more repatriation flights to India?

Hon Grant Robertson: I don't have any information about that with me today, Craig, but I do know that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade continues to work with New

Zealanders overseas to do what they can to support them to return. We've obviously had a number of people come back from India and a number of flights, and I know that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials in India continue to do everything they can, but I don't have specific information.

Media: On March 25, which was quite a fateful day for this Government now, you put the idea of a universal basic income on the table, or you said it was on the table. Does it remain on the table?

Hon Grant Robertson: I've said before that the really important thing when it comes to stimulus in the economy is getting the timing of that right. Right now, when we're in level 4 and level 3, stimulus packages will only have a limited amount of effect. What we want to do is make sure that we're planning for the medium and long term for New Zealand, and so we will be looking at all the options that are available to continue to support New Zealanders to both make ends meet but also be part of an economy that grows. Those decisions have not been made, so it's not a matter of saying something is on the table or off the table. We're just considering all of our options at this time.

Media: Did you consider raising the level of bank guarantee on the existing—of Government guarantee on the existing loan scheme from 80 percent to 100 percent?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, we're continuing to have a look at what's possible in terms of the business finance guarantee scheme. The tweaks that we've made today address some of the feedback that we've had, particularly around the general security agreement requirement. We're also making some changes for access to particular types of businesses—so we're bringing farm lending into that scheme, which wasn't at the beginning—and we're looking at some other changes in the future to make sure the scheme operates well. So I'll have a bit more to say about that.

I think what we've got now is a situation where we're very aware of those small and medium enterprises—50 FTEs or less. These are the people who, as I said, often have their own personal finances involved. We needed to create a scheme that meant that they could get access to working capital to pay the rent and pay their other bills. The business finance guarantee scheme is more towards the medium enterprise end, and we're tweaking that to make sure it works as well as it possibly can.

Media: One those clusters that are close to being closed—or one has been closed—can you give us detail on which clusters they were, and is that an encouraging sign that we are able to see 28 days without any new cases in some instances?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Yes, yes. I'd need to check on the website to see if that's signalled on the website, because that's where we're posting details of the clusters. It's very encouraging. We've determined that a cluster would be officially closed when you've got a 28-day period from when the last case was reported, and so the fact that that's what we're seeing in more of these clusters is extremely encouraging, and we do expect to be able to close off the other clusters.

Media: At which point going forward—maybe in the next week—will we know if level 3 is working, if we have—are we looking—because there's a two-week transmission period, obviously. So when will you be looking at case numbers and things, and will we know that Kiwis are obeying the rules and we're not spreading COVID-19 during level 3?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Well, we're continuing to look at the case numbers every day and provide that advice to the Government as to what the cases are telling us. It's a mixture of—it's looking really good. We've got very low case numbers, but at the same time we are seeing cases being reported. So it just reminds us that we do have to be cautious, and we will continue to be doing that for the next period that we're in level 3 in order to be able to provide advice as to what level 2 might mean.

Hon Grant Robertson: And it's just important to remember that the key thing here is to break the chain of community transmission. We do not have evidence of widespread

community transmission in New Zealand, so that is something that we should all be encouraged by. But as we see the cases come in we continue to look closely at them to understand everything we can about them, and, as we did when we were moving from level 4 to level 3, we want the most up-to-date information to inform the Government's decision about that. That's the information that we get provided every day by the Ministry of Health, and so while the signs remain and continue to be encouraging, we will be making that decision with the most up-to-date information.

I'll just come down the front here, where there was one.

Media: [Inaudible] people receiving main benefits in the last week. What do you make of those numbers, and how much further can we expect that balloon, I guess, to bubble out?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, as I said last week when we were talking about this, it's extremely distressing for every single New Zealander who loses their job and find themselves in a situation of going on the jobseeker benefit. What we're doing is attempting to limit that as much as possible, and the wage subsidy scheme has done a great job of that, but we've been very clear from the start that the impact of this crisis will be more significant than the global financial crisis, and that did see unemployment rise sharply as well. What we have to do is work closely with all New Zealanders to support them not only to stay in work but be able to retrain to get new jobs and new skills, and support the sectors that will provide those. That will be a focus within the Budget.

Media: Dr McElnay, on Wednesday, Dr Bloomfield urged all New Zealanders to get their flu shots, saying vaccines were widely available. However, a PHO that represents hundreds of doctors in Auckland has told its members that on advice of the health ministry, vaccine stocks will likely run out again next week. Why are you giving what appears to be misleading information to the public?

Dr Caroline McElnay: We've seen a fantastic response to the influenza immunisation programme this year, and we've given out more vaccines than have ever been distributed. We continue to get more vaccine coming into the country, but there has been a request from the sector, as well as information that we provided to the sector, that if there are any potential for any delay in receiving vaccines that the sector have that information. So there was information that was given out to the sector to say we are working with Pharmac to get the vaccine out there. We will get you the vaccine that you need, but be prepared that you may have not have that vaccine at the time that you actually are planning to use it. So that was a very specific request from the sector that they have that heads-up, but we do know that we've got more vaccine coming in, and we're hoping that there won't be any issue with any delay.

Hon Grant Robertson: Just to be very clear about that, there are 700,000 vaccine doses around the country that have not yet been administered—so they are in the community. There is availability of flu vaccine. As at last week, 587,000 people had been vaccinated. That compares to 290,000 people on the same date in 2019. So with those 700,000 vaccines still available in the community to actually be administered, we are confident that we have the supplies we need. We've already vaccinated far more people than we would have in the past. What the communications that are coming through from the Ministry of Health indicate is that there is more vaccine on the way, and we're asking—

Media: No, it says that it will likely run out again next week. It's not necessarily just that it's—

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, the communications we've had from the Ministry of Health are that there are 700,000 vaccines out there. There are more on the way. That's simply a piece of information to the sector around the way in which the vaccines have already been delivered into the communities and what will be coming in the future.

Media: Sorry, just to follow up on that—this PHO was saying they will likely run out again next week. That was the advice from the Ministry of Health, so how can Dr Bloomfield argue that they're widely available?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, because they are widely available—because there are 700,000 vaccines in the community. What this is about—as we’ve discussed on quite a few times at these press conferences—is around the distribution within a DHB, and, clearly, if there is a particular PHO that’s saying this, then we need to be talking to that DHB about how those doses that are already out there can be administered.

Media: One GP we’ve spoken to has cancelled 50 flu jab bookings for next week due to the uncertainty. Is that good enough, and doesn’t that just reaffirm the position from the Medical Association that the national flu campaign has been a complete debacle?

Hon Grant Robertson: No, I don’t accept that at all. When you’ve got a situation where you’ve got 587,000 people being vaccinated compared with 290,000 at the same time last year, that actually represents a campaign that is out there and is working. Clearly, we need to continue to ensure that the distribution chains within our health system work well, but I actually think with that level of vaccination and a commitment that more is coming, we are continuing the kind of campaign that New Zealanders would expect.

Thomas, we haven’t had any from you.

Media: Dr McElnay, just a question from our news room: have you got an update on the number of suicides that have occurred since lockdown, and, if so, what is the policy regarding testing them for COVID-19, and is there a policy in terms of mental health checks on vulnerable patients during the alert levels?

Dr Caroline McElnay: I don’t actually have information specifically around suicides, but we can provide that information for you. What I can say, though, is that as part of our surveillance strategy to make sure that we’re identifying and capturing any COVID-19 infections that might be out there, any sudden deaths that occur in the community that are subject to a coroner’s inquiry—that testing for COVID occurs if it is felt that that person could have died as a result of that. So that’s an extra piece of information that we have to tell us about COVID-19 out in the community.

Media: Minister, just a question in terms of the business finance guarantee scheme: how much more risk are taxpayers going to be exposed to by removing that requirement to have a general security agreement, and do you expect that even if that requirement is removed, banks will still have a requirement themselves and take some security from businesses?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, at this time, our risk remains the 80 percent risk that we announced at the beginning. We’ve been clear that what we wanted from the scheme was for viable but vulnerable businesses to be supported. Clearly, there are some businesses that banks won’t support, and we mentioned that at start—for example, those who are on the watch list—but what we wanted from the scheme was for banks to apply it in such a way that businesses that perhaps they might have not processed previously they would, as long as they were still viable. In terms of what they will now do that we’ve removed the requirement for the general security agreement, it will still be up to banks, but, as I said at the start, we are continuing to look at further tweaks to the scheme.

Media: Just a follow-up, in terms of the extra risk that taxpayers are taking on, if a bank—sorry. If a business collapses, then taxpayers might not be able to take that business owner’s house, which I know is—it’s an unfortunate and horrible situation, but you, no doubt, have to balance taxpayer risk as well as—

Hon Grant Robertson: Bear in mind, the schemes are being delivered by the banks, so in the end it remains up to the bank to make decisions about what kind of security they will take on, but what we’re saying is the Government is not requiring that in terms of our 80 percent underwriting. But we’re not in a position of being the people who look at a particular type of security. I do think it’s really important. It is one of the reasons why we have put in place today the small business loan scheme—is because we want those smaller businesses, many of whom often are financed off the back, perhaps, of a second mortgage on their home, to get support that does not require them to concern themselves about that,

and if they can pay it back within a year, it's interest-free. It's about cash flow for those small businesses that play such a big part in our economy.

Media: I have a slightly indelicate question on behalf of a colleague. So thousands of people have been going to the beach, but councils have been told to keep toilets closed, which has seen people relieving themselves in the sand dunes. Can you please clear up the messages around allowing regional travel to beaches, but not opening the facilities to cope with that?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, I think we'll probably go back to the beginning here—that people need to show a sense of personal responsibility. I think we all know what's right and wrong when it comes to relieving oneself at the beach.

In terms of a general comment around what people should be doing, we continue to want them to stay close to home. Under level 3 there has been some relaxation to allow you to travel within your region, but that is for short-term recreation. It's also to make sure that there are some further options available for people, but the first and best preference is to stay local.

I could say some other things, but I won't. *[Interruption]* Sorry, we're just down the front, then we'll come up here, Jenna.

Media: Minister, Lawyers for Climate Change have written to you and other Ministers. They're worried that the shovel-ready projects criteria doesn't address things like gas emissions and the effects of climate change, which they're warning could be unlawful. What assurances can you give to them that that is being considered in future decisions being made on these projects?

Hon Grant Robertson: So the decisions on what projects we adopt will be made by Cabinet, and Cabinet will be operating under the plans that we've already announced, and one of the core ones of those is the importance of a transition to a low-carbon economy. So the decisions we make will be supportive of those goals that the Government has had from the beginning, and we showed that with our New Zealand Upgrade Programme, which had a mixture of projects, that—yes—did include some roading projects but it included rail. It included getting rid of some of those boilers in our schools and our hospitals. It includes cycling. It included walking projects. So that's a sign, I think, you can see of the fact that when we think about infrastructure, we have in mind all of the things that matter: creating jobs, making sure we can transition to that low-carbon environment, growing productivity, and keeping the economy moving. We continue to balance those in our decisions about the infrastructure projects.

Media: And just a question from one of our regional reporters: they've had a specific plea from West Coast mayors that they want to be allowed to go into level 2 sooner. What do you say to them—because they're really struggling there at the moment.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, look, I think it's really important that we continue to stay the course on level 3. New Zealanders know the great gains we made in level 4, and we need to lock those in through level 3, and that's been because, as a country of 5 million people, we have decided, collectively, that we're all in this together. And so I can understand in communities like the West Coast they're saying "We want to get on with it."—we all do—but we've got to stay the course in level 3. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, we haven't ruled out the possibility in the future that there could be regional differences, but for now this is something that we're all in together. You know, I also do bear in mind that—and I'm sure the mayors of the West Coast will understand this—our very first death from COVID-19 was from someone on the West Coast. So I think it's a reminder for all of us that this virus can spread, and spread easily, and that means that we have to stay vigilant under level 3.

Jenna.

Media: ANZ and mortgage brokers are warning more New Zealanders will default on their loans like mortgages in the coming months. Are you concerned about that?

Hon Grant Robertson: Oh, I'm very concerned for all New Zealanders that they have the resources to be able to pay their mortgages, and that's why one of the very early things that was agreed with banks was the mortgage deferral scheme. It's why we're continuing to provide a range of support through the tax system and through the small business cash flow support we announced today. So, you know, this is a situation where there's going to be a big impact on the New Zealand economy, but the Government is doing all it can to support people to be able to pay their bills like their mortgages.

Media: Have you been given any forecast on the number of defaults and the financial cost of that, and are you offering any help to banks to cover those losses—

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, obviously, the business finance guarantee scheme is a significant contribution from the Government to carrying risk for those loans. The banks have very strong balance sheets in New Zealand, and while they're under pressure—like all companies are—they are making arrangements with their customers right now for interest-only payments for deferral of mortgage payments. I don't have specific information about the particular impacts of that, but we all know that this is an economic shock that's going to affect a lot of New Zealanders.

Media: Another slightly random question from a colleague—

Hon Grant Robertson: The day for it.

Media: —there's a company down south who is creating T-shirts, and they've actually got Dr Bloomfield's face on it with the words "Curve Crusher". They're using it for charity, though—\$50,000 has actually been raised for Women's Refuge. What do you think about this innovative idea, and would you consider buying one?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, I think, you know, it's fantastic that New Zealanders, in a time of crisis like this, are raising money for a cause like Women's Refuge, and I think we should all be really proud of the fact that in a time of crisis, people come together like that. I'm very conscious of the fact that Dr Bloomfield has become somewhat of a cult figure in New Zealand, and from time to time that means you end up on T-shirts and tea towels and so on. At this stage, I haven't found the website address to make that order, and I'd have to make sure they had the right sizes available as well.

Craig.

Media: Dr McElnay, just a question on health workers with COVID-19. I think it was last weekend, there was a nurse at Burwood that was reported as positive. Do we have any details yet on how they got it?

Dr Caroline McElnay: I don't have those details to hand, but those are certainly situations where we investigate fully to find out how they might have been exposed to the virus.

Media: And is there a time line on the current investigation out of Waitematā—how long you expect that might take?

Dr Caroline McElnay: We expect to get a further update later today. As I've said, the first case was notified over the weekend, so there was some initial investigation that happened there. Then, there was a case yesterday, and then again today. So there's been extensive further testing, and we expect to get further results either today or tomorrow.

Hon Grant Robertson: We'll just take a couple more—Ben.

Media: Minister, now that the final details around the Cannabis Legislation and Control Bill are released, will you be voting for it?

Hon Grant Robertson: At a personal level, yes, I will be, in the referendum—that's a decision and a position I've held for a very long time—but this is a personal choice for New

Zealanders, and what the release of the bill means is we're at the next stage of New Zealanders being able to make up their mind on it.

One thing I would say—and this is a personal view—is, for me, it is not the most important issue that's facing New Zealand or facing me, and while I have a moral stance on it, I'm one individual. Now is the opportunity for New Zealanders to understand the bill. There will be a large public education campaign run about it, which will enable people to understand it as much as possible.

Media: Have you seen public polling that puts Labour at 55 percent at the moment?

Hon Grant Robertson: Oh, I'm not interested in polls at all at the moment. Tova.

Media: On that, though, the poll results have been—

Hon Grant Robertson: Could be the same answer coming your way, but—yes?

Media: —for the National Party—well, maybe if you could respond to the National Party on this, because the poll results for them are 29 percent, and the National Party—Simon Bridges is saying Labour should focus on getting New Zealand back to work, not leaking dodgy numbers. What's your response to that?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, we are focused completely on making sure that we support New Zealanders through COVID-19, and I'm very, very confident the poll coming into the public arena had nothing to do with the Labour Party.

Media: Does 29 percent for National sound like dodgy numbers to you?

Hon Grant Robertson: I'm just not interested in polls at the moment. Thomas.

Media: Minister Robertson, just a question from our news room. You will have seen the pictures of a hundred people at a tangi in Canterbury. What would you expect police and health authorities to do about it, particularly in light of the fact that local police are saying they're reluctant to police a tangi?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, I think everybody will understand just how difficult this issue is. For all of us, we're going to have people in our lives who we know who, potentially, are going to be facing the loss of a family member or a friend at this time, and it's incredibly hard. We've put the rules in place we had around limiting people who go to tangi or who go to funerals for good public health reasons. In the particular case that's here, the family said about having a tangi with only 10 or fewer people attending, and it blew out to a larger number. That's really disappointing. These rules have been put in place in consultation with groups within the Māori community in particular, and so we urge people in really difficult circumstances to stick to the rules here, and I'm sure the police will take a compassionate approach. But the rules are the rules, and people do need to stand by them.

Media: Minister, I just have another question on the business finance guarantee scheme—

Hon Grant Robertson: My favourite topic, so yes.

Media: Yes—I love it. Will agricultural businesses be able to get loans under the scheme—is that what you're saying?

Hon Grant Robertson: That's correct. So that's the change that we made. Initially, they were taken out of the scheme because it was felt by the banks and ourselves that they were dealt with through other products that the banks might have, but we think, in order to make the scheme as valuable as possible, it's time to open up to those businesses.

Thanks everybody. Have a good weekend.

conclusion of press conference