

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 9 AUGUST 2021, HANSARD
TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. Good afternoon. Today I have Minister Hipkins with me to talk about the next phase of our vaccine roll-out. But first I wish to acknowledge that the Queen has approved the appointment of Dame Cindy Kiro as an additional Dame Grand Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit and as an additional Companion of the Queen's Service Order. These appointments are an important formal step in the process of Dame Cindy becoming our next Governor-General.

While we're on the subject of acknowledgments, I wanted to acknowledge the New Zealand Olympic team, who have done us all so proud over the past few weeks. This was our most successful games ever with 20 medals one over 11 sports, the broadest range of success in New Zealand Olympic history. Even if there weren't crowds in the stands, the public at home have been behind the team all the way, and I hope that that support continues as the Paralympic team gear up for their competition in two weeks' time.

Now, to run through the week ahead. Tomorrow and Wednesday I'll be in Wellington as usual. On Tuesday night I will speak at a function here in Parliament to celebrate a challenging but ultimately successful kiwifruit season for Zespri. On Friday I'm in Auckland where I'll visit a school celebrating completion of a rebuild and then tour two housing developments to see the progress we're making on delivering more homes for New Zealanders.

This Thursday I will be speaking at the reconnecting New Zealanders forum in Wellington, where Professor David Skegg, Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield, and other health and business leaders including Rob Fyfe will join me as we share the Government's response to the advice we've received from our expert public health advisory group, led by Professor Skegg on our health border settings for the next few months.

We know that people are keen to resume international travel to reunite with friends and family, to carry out business engagements and so on. The Government is equally keen and we also know the need for minimising lockdowns and keeping New Zealanders safe. We only closed the border to keep COVID out, and our ultimate goal is to resume quarantine-free travel when we can in a way that is safe and continues to keep COVID out. Any changes to border settings will be very carefully considered and phased based on risk. We simply don't know enough to set out every single phase of reopening right now, though. We've come too far and gained too many freedoms to rush at this next step and to go backwards.

One thing you'll hear this week from Professor Skegg is the latest thinking and the impact of the Delta variant in many countries' response to COVID. In short, it is much more dangerous than other strains of COVID. It changes our risk calculation in the same way it's changed everyone's risk calculation, and you'll see that it has changed some of the advice that we received. So we'll share more of our thinking on where all of this takes us on Thursday and set out our actions through the second half of this year in response to the scientific advice, but we wanted you to see the same information that we are receiving.

At the heart of our ongoing COVID response is our vaccine campaign, and last week we saw further ramping up of our efforts. Last Tuesday the vaccination programme officially hit the 2 million doses mark. On Wednesday we reached our highest vaccination daily total, just shy of 45,100 people, and last week we vaccinated 190,292 New Zealanders with their first dose and 72,768 received their second dose—our best week so far. In total, to date, 35 percent of the eligible population have received at least one dose and 21 percent of the eligible population are now fully vaccinated. The booking system continues to perform well with a record 296,650 vaccinations booked last week, so that means we've got well over a million vaccinations booked in the system.

Last Friday we opened up the bookings for New Zealanders aged 55 and over. Already, more than 75 percent of those aged 55 and over have been vaccinated or are booked in. This very

rapid take-up of the offer to be vaccinated is fantastic and shows the strength of our team in beating COVID, and I want to say thank you to everyone who's done so.

The upside of this rapid turn-around in bookings is that our system is now ready to move, ahead of schedule, to the next age band. So I'm pleased to announce today that from 8 a.m. this Friday—8 a.m. this Friday, 13 August—New Zealanders aged 50-plus will be invited to book their vaccine. There are around 319,000 people in this age cohort. People in the 50-plus age band who haven't already been vaccinated will receive an invitation by letter, text, or email from this Friday, or they can go to Book My Vaccine to make an appointment. As with each extension of eligibility to book, those Kiwis in previous age cohorts who are not yet vaccinated or booked can still make a booking. There's no cut-off and nobody will miss out.

I received a range of correspondence lately stating how simple and easy the booking process in getting a vaccination is. So please do make the most of it. One correspondent from Tauranga said, "The whole process from booking my times, arriving to be processed, through to the actual vaccination was superb. The posters, the handouts, the little certificate card, the staff administering the whole process, the cup of tea and biscuits, the smiles and care from everyone took my breath away." I can't guarantee tea and biscuits absolutely everywhere, I should add.

For those who haven't booked and are eligible already, if you get stuck, simply call the COVID vaccination Healthline on 0800 28 29 26, between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., seven days a week.

We are now happy to take questions.

Media: Prime Minister, how much of a lapse was it that border workers went on to the *Rio de la Plata* when they knew that there were COVID cases possible there? How much of a mistake was that?

PM: Well, the first thing I'd say is that we have always prioritised our front-line workers, and that has included our port workers, for vaccination. They have had vaccines available for some time. What we have encountered, though, are a range of barriers to those individuals having a vaccination, and that includes, unfortunately, misinformation, hesitancy, and, of course, from the ports themselves a concern that mandating would destroy, potentially, supply lines.

However, we cannot afford to have a situation where our port workers are not vaccinated, which is why we have mandated it. From 26 August, our port workers must have received their first dose, or they will not be able to work in those roles any longer. That is in spite of the concerns that have been raised that these are privately employed individuals; these are not Government employees. But we still, none the less, believe it to be so important to New Zealand's health and wellbeing we are mandating it and it may mean job loss.

Media: Where was this urgency, though, before we had this problem?

PM: There's always been urgency. You know, right from the beginning we said this is our most important group. And every New Zealander will know now that vaccine supply is not an issue, availability is not an issue. Unfortunately, misinformation, hesitancy, has been a barrier we've faced. That, however, none the less, has not stopped us from now mandating it for this group of workers. We'd put that mandate in some time ago and they have now until 26 of this month, when they run the risk of losing their jobs. We've got plenty of time.

Hon Chris Hipkins: If I could just clarify, there are actually two dates here—so 26 August and the end of September. There are two different groups of port workers covered by the new order, and they will all need to have their first dose within that time frame.

Just to be clear, I've spoken about this several times here, around my concern around the port workers. I wanted to keep the ports open. It's important for New Zealand that we keep the ports open. We've been doing a lot of work to encourage voluntary uptake of vaccination. One of the reasons that we have been careful around introducing the mandatory requirement for vaccination is that the feedback that we've had from some of our smaller ports—in particular, Tauranga is, if you like, one of our bigger ports. Even they have had concerns, but

it could potentially mean that they would have to stop both receiving and sending out cargo. That would be potentially huge for New Zealand.

PM: Well, before we go on, I'll just get Minister Hipkins to update us on the latest information we have around testing. So you'll be aware that, of course, no one from this ship has taken shore leave. So the contact has been for those workers who have been unloading the ships. Now, the reason the number is so high is the unloading took place over the course of, roughly, four days. Not everyone who has been on that ship is likely to have contact with crew, and they do have requirements around precautions when engaging with international cargo.

We've got 98 workers, but I'll ask Minister Hipkins to give an update for you on where we're at with testing. All, of course, have been asked to isolate.

Hon Chris Hipkins: So 98 people who are deemed to be at risk have been tested. Six of those didn't actually go on to the ship but were deemed to be needed to be tested. Of those, so far we've had 23 negative test results—that's as of about an hour ago; 23 results had come in, including the pilot who took the ship back out to sea on Saturday. So they were rapid test results, they have been done today, so we'll get further results as the evening progresses.

Media: Was it still 11 positive? Just updating those numbers.

PM: So those are the international crew.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, that's right. The numbers that I went through were the New Zealanders, the people working New Zealand - side.

PM: Yep. No change to that.

Media: Should the ship have ever been given clearance to unload given its link to a positive case?

Hon Chris Hipkins: One of the things that we'll look at is exactly what happened there. I haven't got a clear picture of exactly what was known, when, and by whom. I've seen different accounts of that, so there will need to be a very good, clear look at whether things should have been done differently, including whether New Zealanders should have been allowed to go on to that ship if there was concern that there was COVID-19 on it.

Media: Should New Zealanders have been allowed on to that ship without testing the crew first?

Hon Chris Hipkins: It's not always possible to test the crew first, and you have to bring the crew onshore often to test them. So we will look at the sequence, though, including who knew what and when, and what decisions were made when.

PM: Keeping in mind, we receive 2,000 commercial ship visits a year, and so we have a large number of commercial ships coming in, which often will have a fairly rapid turn-around of offloading. We have very strict requirements around the crew movement for those ships, because we treat them as if they may have COVID-19. So that means that the crew on New Zealand shore - side also have requirements. Regardless of whether or not those cargo ships have tested their crew or not, our New Zealand portside workers have requirements around the way they must behave to keep them safe and to keep others safe.

Media: How long were those port workers in the community before they were notified that they needed to isolate?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So my understanding is that the workers—there was a four-day period where it was berthed, so that's between Wednesday and Saturday. So those workers will have been—

Media: That's pretty risky.

Hon Chris Hipkins: I'm not sure exactly when they were told to isolate. I can get that information for you. Yes, and that is one of the things that we'll be looking very closely at: is exactly who knew what and when, and whether earlier action should have been taken there.

PM: So one final thing I just want to again reiterate is that there were infection prevention controls. PPE protocols were followed by port workers who may have had contact with the ship during their duties. We treat every cargo ship that comes into New Zealand as if those on board may have COVID-19, so I wouldn't want to leave a perception here that our port workers simply operate as if it's business as usual. In a COVID environment, they don't. However, we want them to be vaccinated too, because it is just not good enough to rely on infection controls and social distancing in a high-risk environment. They need to be vaccinated as well.

Media: On Wednesday, our information is that Customs shut down the ship in conjunction with local health authorities, the workers who had been unloading the boat were told to go home and self-isolate immediately. Then on Thursday, there were clearances given for work to begin back on the ship. Why weren't they tested at that point when they were asked to self-isolate?

PM: We've been advised of that pause as well, and this is also one of the things that we are investigating.

Media: So is that a problem for you, that they were not tested when there was known to be a positive case? Work had stopped, it was serious enough to stop, suspend, and self-isolate, and they were allowed back on without testing.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, I'm not going to make a judgment on that until I've got all of the facts, and that that's been thoroughly looked at. I expect that to happen quickly. I don't have that information yet, but once I do then we will share that. I will make a comment on it at that point.

PM: Jane, as I've said, we've already specifically asked the question, "Why was there a pause that was then lifted?" So this is something we've queried of our health officials as well, for good reason.

Media: Going back to what you were saying before, you said—

PM: We haven't got a response on that yet.

Media: —when you were talking about the non-vaccination of port workers, you said it may mean job losses. Can I clarify if you were talking about private sector workers there, or Government workers?

PM: Private sector workers.

Hon Chris Hipkins: There will be certain roles that you will not be able to do if you've not been fully vaccinated, and that includes going on to a ship that is coming in.

PM: Yeah.

Media: So it's not about the Government saying you can't have this job any more, because you haven't got a mandate to do that. It's about the allocation of where they can work?

PM: So we've put in place a mandate that now says that if you're going to engage in a high-risk environment with international ship crew, for instance, then we are requiring you to be vaccinated. And this applies to people who are not employed strictly by Government, so that is a step beyond the early mandate that we had. That's why we've gone through that process very, very carefully. And you can imagine why we'd need to do that, because we've stepped outside the realms, now, of people who are employed directly by Government.

Media: Can you tell us if the 98 workers were vaccinated—do you have that information?

Hon Chris Hipkins: It was a—

PM: I think that's already—we've already shared—

Hon Chris Hipkins: —reasonably small number; I think around nine of those people were fully vaccinated, and I think two—

PM: Two had had a first dose

Hon Chris Hipkins: —had received their first dose. So those numbers are too low.

Media: What's your risk assessment of the New Zealand crew being out and about given what you're looking into—the pause, the isolation, and the circumstances around potential contact, and then their potential contact with the community?

PM: So at the moment we've been told about that those port workers had contact with the ship. We don't yet have a breakdown of how many would likely have had contact with the ship's crew. Obviously, we've got 23 negative tests already, and one of those was the pilot who would have actually been within the vessel piling it out of the harbour, so that gives you a bit of an indication at this point. We've been told at this point that generally the workers had been reported as being well—but as much as that's an indication—and local public health staff have told us that the infection prevention controls were in place. That's all we can use as information to give you a risk assessment.

Media: But they would have been back in the community, back with their families in the interim period over the three or four days?

Hon Chris Hipkins: If they followed all of the risk mitigations that they were required to follow, then that makes the risk much lower. So part of the investigation will be to see whether there was any breach of that. So were they wearing their PPE, were they doing the distancing, were they doing all of the things that we ask them to do and that we require them to do? So part of the process now is to identify whether the system's fallen down in any way.

Media: So there is an element of risk given all of those different things that may or not have happened—you know, what is the risk—

PM: Well, of course, they were all in isolation because we need to go through a process of assessing that risk, so everyone's getting tested. There may be some who may require a second test and longer forms of isolation, depending on the level of contact they had over the course of those four days. But, ultimately, until we have negative tests, we treat this very cautiously. We want those negative results to come back to really give us an assessment of what we're dealing with. I think anything beyond that at the moment is speculative.

Media: Can I ask you just what the level of risk is that—from what you know now, what is your level of risk?

PM: And I'm giving you the best—we're not public health specialists; we can't. But, equally, I think if someone from public health was standing here, they would say, "Well, that's the reason we're testing everyone." We take a cautious approach.

Media: Did they ask those households of those workers to also isolate at this stage?

PM: We'd need to check whether or not they've made that ask. Partially, I imagine what they'll do is assess, again, the level of contact individuals have even had with ship crew, if any.

Media: Prime Minister, we are 18 months in from COVID. We knew this was a risk. We knew this was an area that we needed to focus on. How annoyed are you that the processes weren't followed, and what was your reaction when you heard the news?

PM: But, again, we've been advised from local public health that infection prevention controls were followed in this case. However, we also want everyone who's in a high-risk environment to be vaccinated. Now, we've done everything we can to make sure that that is happening, but we have, unfortunately, people here in this case who have been hesitant, who have been the subject of misinformation, and so that is why we have mandated it. But it does mean that we are now in a position where there may be port workers in the future who refuse to be vaccinated and who may no longer be able to work in their roles.

Media: The Maritime Union are saying it's a bureaucratic stuff-up, though. What do you say to that?

PM: Oh, I reject that, because there's been no suggestion that availability of the vaccine is an issue. You can see here that we've got 21 percent of the country now fully vaccinated. Unfortunately, what we're up against here is misinformation. We need to get through that, though, because this is a health and safety risk for those workers and their families.

Hon Chris Hipkins: The workers that we are talking about here have had access to the COVID-19 vaccine longer than just about any other New Zealander.

Media: Can I ask you about Queensland—has the genome sequencing been done? Do we know if it was linked to Queensland?

PM: Happy to provide you with that information, but, of course, my understanding is that they did link it—I believe they linked it to the crew, in which case we have no positive cases in New Zealand; we just have the crew. So there's no new information there.

Media: Will you consider bringing forward the September 30 deadline at all—whether it's doable just given that we've had four ships recently off the coast of New Zealand?

PM: And good vaccination rates in those other cases. Here at Tauranga Port, we've obviously had some different numbers.

Hon Chris Hipkins: We'll keep it under review.

Media: Health authorities will be investigating this? Is that right?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, absolutely.

Media: So who is calling the shots, I mean, in terms of, you know, allowing port workers on and off the boat?

PM: So no one who is infected has come off the boat; it's about the port workers in Tauranga.

Media: New Zealand workers going on, I only said—sorry. But I'm just trying to get a sense of like which Government agencies are involved. Is it the ports calling the shots? Are the health authorities investigating their own actions?

PM: So in terms of making sure that all of the requirements and the port—that would be between the ports and our local public health authorities; in terms of the decision making at the port around the way the crew are treated and so on, so local public health.

Media: How can you be sure that disinformation was the cause here? What events have you got to support that?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, I've spoken about this before. The low rates of vaccination amongst our port workers—they by far fall into the lowest vaccination category of any of our front-line border workers—has been an area of concern for me for some time. So it is something that I've been having conversations about, including with employers, with unions, with other representatives, and it does appear clear that there is a greater degree of misinformation here, a greater degree of conspiracy theory, and that's something that we've been working to address. What we also know is that many of those people, when they have a good one-on-one conversation with someone who's knowledgeable about vaccines, can give them good impartial, fact-based scientific information, a lot of that hesitancy disappears, but it's quite an intensive process.

Media: Do you know why it is more in this specific area than anywhere else?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I wouldn't want to speculate.

PM: Yeah, look, it probably—speaking to some of the representatives across the ports, maybe some of the unions, may give you greater insight into that. Anything we would share would just be anecdotal and probably not that helpful. Now, one thing we'd say is that we had identified this issue. That is why we have mandated vaccination. There's very few areas

where we've done that, but we believed that it was important enough to do it at the ports. That has been in place for a little while now. We've been trying to work through and make sure that everyone's aware that it's crunch time by the end of this month if those workers are not vaccinated.

Media: Given that mandating vaccination is probably grist to the mill with some of these kind of conspiracy theorists, you know, what is then the risk that we may have ports that are understaffed and cannot by the time this deadline's up—what is the risk that goods will not be able to flow in and out of New Zealand?

PM: It's been a concern that's been raised with us, which is why we gave the time line that we have.

Hon Chris Hipkins: That has been one of the factors that we've been weighing up very carefully as we've gone along here, that if we'd done this too early it just would have fuelled the conspiracy theorists. For the smaller ports it's going to be a bigger challenge than for the larger ports, because there are some specialist roles where the ports may only employ a very small number of people in those roles. So ships' pilots is an example that I've spoken about here before. So if you're a small port you may only have, you know, two or three ships' pilots and if even one of them says "No, I'm not willing to be vaccinated and therefore can't do that job.", that could potentially have an impact on whether those ports can continue to bring international ships into them.

Media: So you are saying that one-on-one conversations often can yield a better result. I mean, this seems like a potentially economically catastrophic thing for New Zealand, potentially. What steps are being taken to really get in and make sure that—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Those one-on-one conversations are happening. So it is more resource intensive. The local public health units are making sure that they're supplying people who can have those detailed conversations with people, to take the time to outline the vaccination, to outline exactly how it works so that they can be more comfortable.

Media: Is there any legal ability to fire these people from their jobs if they don't get vaccinated? Like, you mentioned moving them around out of those high risk areas. Is that happening now? Are they being moved off those front lines now or when will that happen?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So, ultimately, that will be a matter for their employer. So the employers will be responsible for ensuring that they are complying with the order. The order will say that in certain roles only people who have been fully vaccinated can do those certain roles. How employers manage that from an employment perspective is something for them to manage.

Media: So you don't have oversight of that.

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, we don't.

Media: Does that concern you that you don't have oversight of that—what could be a gaping hole for New Zealand?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, it won't be, because by law the employers will only be able to allow people to do those jobs if they've been fully vaccinated.

PM: Just keep in mind, we have operated our ports safely without vaccines for some time. Now, that is not a reason not to make sure that we are having that extra tool utilised at our ports and at our borders. Vaccines are a really important extra barrier of protection. But we did operate for a long period before vaccines were available, safely, with other requirements. None of those have changed. Even with those areas where we have got higher rates of vaccination, we're still requiring infection prevention protocols as an extra layer of protection. And I will add, Minister Hipkins is right. There are two dates—there's an August date and a September date.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Can I just that one of the things that we really had to do over the last six months is work really hard to make sure we're keeping those supply lines open. The international shipping arena is a complicated space at the moment. It's taking two to three

times as long, for example, to process ships when they come into New Zealand, because of the disruption that's happening around the rest of the world, because ships are loaded differently, potentially less efficiently, and, therefore, it's taking longer for us to process them. Some of those shipping companies, depending on which requirements we introduce, would just drop New Zealand off their itineraries. So we work really hard to keep those supply lines open because they are critical for New Zealand.

Media: Just on the back of what Luke asked about the potential economic ramifications, Charles Finny had said to me a few weeks ago that he wanted to have discussions with Government about exemptions to the vaccination order and particularly the short supply of ship pilots. Is that on the cards at all?

PM: Which is one of the things that was raised with us very early on when we talked about mandating vaccination at the port. The issue of pilot operators was raised with us directly, because there was concern that it may mean that some ports just simply wouldn't be able to operate. After a number of conversations, it was determined that with enough lead-in time, we would be able to resolve some of these issues. So we haven't put in place exemptions; instead, we've got the time available to the ports to work through those issues.

Hon Chris Hipkins: The order does allow for exemptions. The threshold for that will be very high. None have been granted at this point.

PM: But that, again, was one of the things in consideration. I just want to open up more broadly, just recognising we're at half-past, and I just want to see if anyone else has got other issues they want to canvass?

Media: Prime Minister, are you happy that Facebook and Google YouTube are doing enough in New Zealand to prevent the sort of misinformation getting into New Zealand?

PM: Yeah, look, Bernard, it would be fair to say that I haven't sat down in recent times and analysed some of the more recent activity from those major platforms around managing disinformation. But my view would be it would be hard to do enough in this space, because it is such a problem, and I can't emphasise enough how much it puts people's health and wellbeing at risk. You know, it's not just about our economy. Yes, that's incredibly important, but it's about saving people's lives, and to see the lack of responsibility from individuals who post information, let alone the sometimes lack of ownership from those platforms around helping better manage it is incredibly frustrating. We're doing everything we can to provide people with all the information we need. We're trying to lead from the front. We're getting the vaccines ourselves; community leaders are as well. But we are still up against the battle where people are just being told absolute rubbish and it's incredibly hard.

Media: In terms of the September—was it 30 September? That's the second deadline?

PM: That's the second deadline. So, forgive me, August and September—the Minister was right to point out there are two.

Media: OK. In terms of the constraints to bringing forward the September one, in addition to—you know, other than the supply chain concerns, is there another reason why that deadline could not be brought forward?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No. Ultimately it's about making sure people have ample opportunity to get vaccinated, and that we have the time to do that more intensive work with them, if they require more information.

PM: And also I would have thought that, actually, at the borders—I mean, when we put this in place for our Government employees, that first tranche, you'll recall that we did a lot of work around potential issues around redeployment. So that was all built into it as well. What do we do with those workers to try and spare them from losing their jobs? And that took quite a bit of effort and energy too.

Media: Sorry, can you just clarify what the dates mean for people? So 26 August—is that a hard deadline for first dose?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, that's for first dose for all those employed by Government agencies working at the ports. The second is for everybody working in front-line roles at the port.

Media: And that's the September one—that's the hard deadline?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So I can get you a breakdown of which groups fits into which date,

Media: Basically by the end of September, you want anyone working at the ports, Government or private, to have their first dose, otherwise gone—out of there?

PM: Correct.

Media: On Friday, New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian said, in response to the surging case numbers in that state, "We now have to live with Delta, one way or another, and that's pretty obvious." Does that spell the end of the travel bubble? Would you ever be willing to re-open with a country that has Delta out in the community?

PM: I feel like there's probably a bit more time left to run, really. I think before we make any of those final decisions we'll want to see where New South Wales is at by the end of September. But it's fair to say, while we're in this space in time, while we are vaccinating our general population, we are not going to expose them to quarantine-free travel with a state that has COVID in circulation in the community. One of our criteria was containment, so if it is not contained, then you won't see quarantine-free travel reopen with that state.

Media: Australia and New Zealand have been on similar tracks. How concerning is it for you to see, across the Tasman, that it seems like at least one of the major states has given up on containment?

PM: Ultimately, that will be a call for any individual state, or indeed country. I've been asked a lot for our opinion on other countries' approaches to COVID-19. I think our experience would certainly be that every country and political leaders—you have to carve your own path, you have to use the evidence you have in front of you and the best advice possible. We will just simply not judge any other country or state for their choices, because theirs will be based on the best information, evidence, and advice that they've had provided to them. We, however, have maintained a strategy to try and protect our health and our economic wellbeing. That has been an elimination strategy, and so we won't risk that by opening up quarantine-free travel at a stage when we don't have a vaccinated population.

Media: You confirmed opening up to 50-plus New Zealanders for vaccinations earlier. What's the reason for moving two thresholds forward in pretty quick succession? Is it that there are people in those groups who are not getting vaccinated at the rates that you expected, or there's more supply? I mean, what's the reasoning there?

Hon Chris Hipkins: It shows that the booking system is working exactly as we anticipated, which is that people can efficiently get in and book their vaccine. We want to keep that steady demand, recognising that some of the people who are being invited to book may have to wait a while to get their booking, they'll be booking for some time ahead in the future, for others it will be shorter, and that there will be variation of that around the country. What we want to do is keep stoking the demand into the system. The booking system is operating very efficiently so that as new age cohorts open up, people are able to book in quite quickly.

Media: Have you received any advice around possibly extending the time between the two doses of the Pfizer vaccine?

PM: So, look, there's obviously some data and evidence that's floating around that hasn't come from—as you'll be aware—the clinical trials of the pharmaceutical companies but from real-world data. We're not in a position to, at this stage, announce any change to anything that we're doing at this stage, but it is fair to say that we do keep an eye on all of the data that's being produced around efficacy and so on.

Media: With Delta, does the testing regime around port workers need to be revised? Because, you know, even if they were vaccinated, there is potential they could have—

PM: They are on a testing schedule.

Hon Chris Hipkins: They are on a testing schedule. As we introduce saliva testing, there'll be a potential to test them more frequently as well.

PM: So they are already on a testing schedule. In fact, we use the testing schedule as a bit of a basis for determining who was being mandated around vaccines as well.

Media: Are you doing enough to reach out to different ethnic communities around this vaccination campaign? Is the Ministry for Ethnic Communities involved; is that part of the issue that is happening here?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, absolutely. We are, and we're looking at every way that we can reach communities to build their confidence in the vaccine campaign.

PM: Actually, my recollection is that spread amongst our ethnic communities has been not too bad at this stage of the campaign, but very mindful that there will be distortions by those who were potentially targeted in some of those early tranches of the roll-out, and as we get into the general population, that's where we really need to make sure that we've got an equitable roll-out. We're assessing constantly, though, as to whether or not we need to up our game in different communities and take different approaches as a result.

Media: Is that proving an issue when it comes to port workers specifically, around lack of outreach or different communities?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Like I said, I wouldn't want to speculate and I wouldn't want to generate any stereotypes by making assertions that we don't have any facts for.

PM: Yeah, that's not something that I've had suggested to me as an issue. Yeah.

Media: Back to the Tauranga ship. On Thursday, the Ministry of Health told Stuff, and I quote, "Given the number of days since the pilot had been on board the ship and the fact that he was not on board during his infectious period, it was deemed extremely unlikely that he posed any risk to the ship's crew.", and now we have 11 of the 21—

PM: And as we've said, this is exactly one of the questions that we have asked. If there is sufficient—[*Interruption*] Sorry?

Media: Doesn't this just prove that this is getting out of hand?

PM: No, it proves that there are additional questions that need to be asked around some of those processes—again, keeping in mind we treat every international cargo ship that comes into port as if they are a risk to New Zealand. However, as we've said, there are questions that we are asking, particularly around that pause and then why there was a resumption. It's very fair to say that we have questions around why that was the case, when clearly there was an issue at play on board.

Media: [*Inaudible*] answers to those questions that you're asking.

PM: Likely we'll try and give you an update, I imagine, tomorrow. When we get test results, we also tend to give updates as soon as we receive them as well.

Media: Just on [*Inaudible*], is it your understanding it was the local public health unit that was making these calls?

PM: That's my understanding. That's my understanding, but please let me clarify that before we report on that, but my understanding is that it would be the Bay of Plenty DHB—

Media: That's what the other information that we've got as well, but that's—

PM: Yep, that's what I understand today. OK, Ben.

Media: On the conversion practices bill, because you'd left Wellington for the week when that happened last week, National obviously voted against it, and your [*Inaudible*] of change is to get as many parties as possible on to make lasting change. Do you think that will be

possible in this case, or do you suspect National is making bad-faith arguments against this bill—are they homophobic?

PM: Look, you know, generally, the practice within Parliament is that if you, in principle, support a bill, even if you have some outstanding questions, you generally tend to support it at first reading, in order to enable the general public to have their say, and also to tease out any of those issues or questions that a party may have. So I was surprised that the National Party chose not to support this bill at first reading, because it so clearly is directed at addressing an issue that we know exists—that's been raised very legitimately by our rainbow community, and that seeks to protect, particularly, those young people who we see a higher incidence of mental health issues and self-harm. So, look, I hope that over the course of the select committee process that they may change their position.

Media: A quick question that keeps coming up is whether a parent counsels or blocks their child from receiving puberty blockers, which they can be criminalised—can you just set the record straight—

PM: Yeah, I am hugely disappointed that that would be used for a rationale not to support this bill, when the National Party knows full well that the intent of this bill is, for instance, to try and prevent, you know, the suppression of someone's sexuality or gender identity by forms from everything to exorcisms to some even more extreme forms of treatment. And if they have outstanding questions or issues, these could be legitimately worked through in a select committee process, but I would, again, identify that medical advice by registered practitioners are explicitly excluded within this bill. So that's something I hope that they would be willing to discuss their issues at select committee if they continue to have them.

Media: But what is the answer to this?

PM: Ah, look, these are issues that they're absolutely able to raise, and questions are able to raise. Does it remove their ability to support this bill continuing to be discussed and debate at select committee? No, and I would have hoped that they would have done so.

Media: Sorry, just a clarification, Prime Minister—is that situation punishable under the law?

PM: Well, look, from the description of our law, you have to demonstrate that there's been a wilful desire to suppress someone's identity—that it's affecting someone who's both under age and seriously harming them, and before a prosecution could be laid, that it would have to be approved by the Attorney-General. The bar is very high. On the issue here of medical treatments, again, medical practitioners work through these situations with family and young people and are excluded from the bill. So, look, my view is that what's been thrown up here is one example that, in my mind, could be worked through at select committee to see whether or not that is a legitimate concern. I am challenging them to come to the table at select committee to work those issues through.

Media: The bar is high but parents could face prosecution—

PM: Well, no. That seems to me to be a very unlikely scenario.

Media: Is there an update on trade talks with the UK for an FTA?

PM: Look, you've seen that Minister O'Connor has set out some expectations through to the end of the year over the next couple of months and our hope and aspiration that we reach some conclusion on the principles very shortly, but we're still seeking a high-quality deal as well. Look, I'm going to wrap now. We've been going for almost 45 minutes, but I'll leave you with the last question because you haven't asked one.

Media: Thank you. On midwives, do you think that midwives need to be paid more?

PM: We're obviously in negotiations at the moment, and my hope is that we will be able to find some resolution that recognises the very important role of our midwives. They also, of

course, are affected by pay equity issues and that's something that we're very, very keen to get a resolution around. OK, thanks everyone.

conclusion of press conference