

**ALL-OF-GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCE: FRIDAY, 3 SEPTEMBER 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

Hon Grant Robertson: Kia ora koutou katoa. Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou. Welcome, everybody. Before I very shortly hand to the Director of Public Health, I'll just let you know that, after she gives us a rundown on today's case numbers and other important information, I will do a brief update on the abscondee and then also a brief update on economic support matters before taking your questions.

Dr Caroline McElroy: Thank you, Deputy Prime Minister, and kia ora koutou katoa. There are 28 new community cases to report today: 27 in Auckland and one in Wellington. The one in Wellington is a close contact of an existing case and was already in a managed isolation and quarantine facility. That takes our total numbers associated with this outbreak to 764. Of those, 33 cases are now recovered, giving us an active total of 731. While this fall in today's numbers is encouraging, we are mindful that these outbreaks can have a long tail and we can't afford to become complacent. Ongoing investigations by Auckland regional public health has resulted in the total number of unlinked cases falling from 65 to 31. That work is continuing, and we expect that number to continue to fall.

Based on the latest modelling, the reproductive number likely remains below 1, showing that we have been successful—we are being successful—in breaking the chains of transmission. Further analysis of yesterday's 49 cases shows that 86 percent were contacts of known cases and 51 percent were household contacts who were already isolating; 35 percent were considered to be infectious in the community, but these cases visited either a supermarket or a healthcare provider or were an essential worker.

On hospitalisations, there are now 43 cases in hospital, all in the Auckland area. Of these, nine are in ICU or in a high dependency unit, and three of these patients are currently being ventilated. And our thoughts are with these people and with their whānau at this difficult time.

On contact tracing, as at 9 o'clock today, 37,620 individual contacts have been formally identified. Of these, 31,668, or 84 percent, have been followed up by contact tracers and are self-isolating. Around 87 percent of all contacts identified have had a test.

On waste water, there are no unexpected detections to report in the latest set of results from ESR. Samples collected on Wednesday from Auckland's Waitakere and Wellington's Moa Point treatment facilities detected a positive result, but that's not unexpected as there are known cases in both those catchment areas. There are several samples currently being progressed by ESR. A significant number were received last night and this morning, and they will be processed and reported over the weekend.

Healthcare workers from district health boards throughout the country have continued to put their hands up to help colleagues in Auckland, and we'd really like to thank them for their help. As at 11 o'clock today, 130 staff have been identified as available to work in Auckland across a range of areas; 22 staff members have been deployed to Auckland; a further 20 staff members are being deployed over the weekend; and there's a further 18 where arrangements are being made for them to be deployed. We continue to work closely with the Auckland DHBs to make sure that we can support them and ensure they have the resources that they need. I'd also like to thank Auckland health workers for all the work that they're doing at this point.

Minister Robertson is going to give you some details on the person who absconded yesterday; so I'd just like to give some update on the vaccine roll-out. We are asking anyone who is vaccinated before their booked-in date to then cancel that part of their booked vaccination. That frees up the slot for others. There are a number of people who are walk-ins or are attending drive-in events and getting their vaccination early, which is great, and we really encourage them to do that, but please go online and cancel that part of your vaccination

so it can become available to others. We're aware of a small number of instances where that's been happening.

Yesterday, 89,073 doses were administered, at 583 vaccination sites across the country. Of those, just over 64,000 were first doses and 25,000 were second doses. We continue to get large numbers booking—we had 89,907 yesterday. That means 71 percent of New Zealanders aged 12 and over are now either booked in or have been vaccinated with at least one dose. On 20 August, we also created a new priority group for essential workers, and since then more than 25,916 essential workers have had their first vaccination.

And, finally, I'd just like to mention that, earlier this week, I paid a visit to Auckland Regional Public Health in my capacity as Director of Public Health, and I saw first-hand the response—the scale of the response—in Tāmaki-makau-rau. I met with my colleagues and clinical leaders there. These staff are on the front line. They are working tirelessly to find, report on, give advice on isolation, and investigate new cases of COVID-19 in the community. And I really want to thank them and acknowledge the work that they are doing. They're working in a high-stress environment, and they're making a lot of personal sacrifices to keep us all safe. They're also doing that on top of looking after their own whānau. It reflects that the health system, though, cannot do it alone, and, as always, it's when we do it together that we make a difference.

And, just lastly on testing, which is where the community comes forward and is one of the ways in which the community is part of the response, there were nearly 13,000 tests processed nationwide. Our seven-day rolling average is 20,760. That high rate of testing and the focus on priority groups is giving us increasing confidence that we are finding any cases of COVID-19 that are out there, but we do need to keep testing. So I'd just like to remind you: if you have been at a location of interest or if you are symptomatic, please get a test. That's been our approach to date, it's worked, and it will get us through this outbreak. Thank you.

Hon Grant Robertson: Thank you, Dr McElnay, and can I just endorse a couple of those remarks—firstly, the thanks to the Auckland Regional Public Health Service and, indeed, all of the public health units around New Zealand who are supporting the Auckland regional service. They are doing a phenomenal job of chasing down contacts and of making sure that we have the best possible information in what is a very difficult and evolving situation, and so we genuinely thank them for their hard work. I also want to endorse the comment on testing. It is vitally important that we keep our testing rates up, especially those in the Auckland area but also around New Zealand. If you do have symptoms, please get a test. If you are asked to get a test, please get a test. We need to continue to keep those testing rates up to give us the confidence that we are catching any COVID that may be in the community. And then, finally, to say that these results today are encouraging, but, as Dr McElnay has said, the job is not yet done; we must continue to be vigilant and get on top of this outbreak.

As I said, I'm now going to offer some time line and further explanations around the abscondee and then do a little bit of information giving around the question of economic supports. So the person that absconded from the Novotel was originally tested as they were a close contact of another case. At 2.21 p.m. on Wednesday, the case was informed by the Auckland Regional Public Health Service of a positive result. At the time, the case said he was exercising in a park but he was by himself. A little later, he returned home and picked up a car and dropped it off at a friend's house and then returned home. That friend was already separately identified as a contact and was already in isolation at home. At 3.37 p.m., there was another call from the Auckland Regional Public Health office to the person concerned, and they agreed to be transferred—or it was agreed that they would be transferred. At 6.18 p.m., they were transferred to the managed isolation facility.

As you know, on that Thursday evening, there were a number of examples from the CCTV footage that saw the individual had left their room three times between 11.40 p.m. and 1.04 p.m. On the final occasion, they left down a fire stairwell and approached the fence line. After hiding in bushes as a security staff member passed by, they departed the facility at 1.07 a.m.

As you're possibly not aware, the person then walked home. This has been confirmed through the use of CCTV footage. And an excellent job's been done between Auckland Regional Public Health and the Police, and we can confirm that there are no locations of interest as a result of that walk home and, as far as can be ascertained, no contact with any other person. As you are then also aware, the members of the individual's bubble identified, at approximately 10.30 a.m., that their family member was not with them. There were Police and Defence Force staff who work at the facility who immediately checked his room and then began their search for the individual. Police outside of the facility, I think, were advised at 11.10 a.m. Some time later, police went to the house where the person was residing, and discussions and negotiations then began, and the individual was taken into custody at 2.05 p.m. yesterday.

I want to be very clear: the advice that we have had from the Auckland Regional Public Health Service on the basis of all of this information is that there was no risk to public safety through this incident. However, it is clearly a regrettable incident and one that is now being thoroughly investigated. And we will, obviously, release information about that investigation as soon as it comes to hand. Obviously, I'll take questions about that when we come to questions.

I do, however, want to talk a little bit about the economic supports that we are providing to businesses and individuals. In this particular outbreak, we have the resurgence support payment. This is a payment that is provided to help businesses meet fixed costs such as rent during alert level rises. As of yesterday, the Inland Revenue Department had approved over 147,000 applications, totalling \$454 million to be paid out under this payment. The scheme as it was introduced applies to businesses that had been operating for at least six months before the rise in alert levels on 17 August. It's been raised with me by a number of businesses and some of my parliamentary colleagues that this extended period at a higher alert level is overly restrictive; I agree.

Therefore, Ministers have agreed to reduce the time required for a business to have been in operation to be eligible for the resurgence support payment from six months to one month. These businesses will still be required to meet the other eligibility requirements under the scheme, such as demonstrating a 30 percent decline in revenue, but this will provide cash flow and confidence for more businesses at an uncertain time. These businesses will be able to apply under the new criteria from Thursday, 9 September. Inland Revenue will communicate the change and will contact the businesses who had been declined for not meeting the six-month test, to advise them of the new criteria and invite them to apply under the new settings. We know that many businesses are doing it tough at this time, and we encourage them to apply for all the support that is available. This support includes the small-business cash-flow scheme, the wage subsidy scheme, and, where appropriate, the leave support scheme and short-term absence payment. We will continue to monitor and assess the support that is available for businesses and workers to help them through these uncertain and volatile times.

Briefly, an update on the wage subsidy scheme. Since it came into effect on 20 August, 242,600 applications have been approved, totalling payments of just on \$998 million, with most businesses receiving their payments within the three working-day time line. Applications for the first wage subsidy payment have now closed. I do want to note that due to an administrative error, the website for this was closed last night for two hours between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. If there were any businesses affected by that closure, I am inviting them to get directly in touch with the Ministry of Social Development so that we can address their situation. But, overall, the processing of the first wage subsidy scheme payment has been very successful.

The application for the second two-week payment of the wage subsidy started at 9 a.m. this morning. Businesses that didn't apply for the initial wage subsidy are able to apply for this one. The criteria is the same for the initial application. The revenue test period for the second payment moves forward two weeks and covers the 14 consecutive days from 31 August to 13 September. Looking at the types of firms that have been applying for the scheme, a majority continue to be sole traders or small firms, rather than big companies. About 59

percent of employees covered by the wage subsidy are employed by businesses with between one and 19 staff members. Some 2.5 percent of total applicants are companies with 1000-plus employees. That figure compares with 10 percent following the March 2020 lockdown—so a smaller proportion of larger businesses. As I said last week, this does suggest that larger firms are more confident about their resilience and have used the lessons learnt from the 2020 lockdown to adapt their practices. But, equally, we do recognise that the longer the outbreak goes on the greater the pressure comes on those businesses.

Also, it might be useful to note that I met yesterday with the New Zealand Bankers' Association executive, and we discussed various supports for businesses. As you should be aware by now, I think, all major banks have waived their fees for contactless debit payments at the higher alert levels, to provide a particular help to small businesses, and I think we all appreciate the fact that this has been done. At this point in time, banks reported that there was no need for a Government-backed scheme when it comes to mortgage deferrals. This kind of scheme is only necessary to protect the overall banking system if there were thousands of applications for mortgage deferral. Otherwise—in peacetime, as it were—these can be dealt with by banks themselves. Banks themselves are encouraging anyone who is in this position to talk to them. They can help you work through your options, including the option of deferring mortgage payments for a certain period if that is needed. It is in everyone's interests to work through these issues if you find yourself getting into financial difficulty.

I'd like to remind everybody that, when it comes to the economic impacts of an outbreak like this, we have been here before. The New Zealand economy recovered well, businesses showed resilience, and businesses and employees continued to talk to each other through this process to ensure that they stayed in work and stayed in business. The evidence shows that the approach we took last time worked when it came to the economy, and I'm very confident it'll do so again. Questions?

Media: Why did the Prime Minister shirk her responsibility to inform the public that there was a potential risk to their safety in the community?

Hon Grant Robertson: I would reject that assertion. We did not have any advice that there was a risk to public safety. It was an evolving situation. At that point that the press conference was held yesterday, the police were still present at the address of the person. The operation was not completed until 2.05 p.m. I believe the responsible thing to do here is to let the police do their job. As soon as it was possible to release information, that information was released.

Media: So exactly what information did the Prime Minister have when she stood exactly where you're standing and didn't say anything about this case being on the loose in the community?

Hon Grant Robertson: She had information that there was an evolving situation involving a person who had left MIQ and that a Police operation was active. There was a—

Media: Did she know that they were COVID-positive?

Hon Grant Robertson: I'll just finish my answer. There was a variety of details that were coming forward, but none of it would trump the fact that the Police were still involved in an active operation, and we need to leave the police to do their job. I'll come to Jess.

Media: As a comparison, you would tell the community—

Hon Grant Robertson: Sorry, Jenna; I said I'll come to Jess. I will come back to you. Jess?

Media: I was going to ask about the CCTV footage and whether—because, when the person left and hid in the bushes from the security guard, why was there not anyone monitoring the CCTV cameras at that point?

Hon Grant Robertson: And that is one of the questions that we're asking, and it is one of the questions that is part of the investigation that is now under way. There is a network of

CCTV cameras at the hotel. We obviously have the double fencing that goes around the outside of it, and we have security guards, including one, as we've said, who actually walked by near where the person was. I cannot answer today the question of whether or not they were being monitored, but what I can say is that is one of the questions that we are asking.

Media: We've heard the arguments it's not a prison and that the number of people who do flee are few and far between, but are you satisfied that there are enough checks and balances so that, when it does happen, these people can be noticed quickly and we can stop them being a risk to the community? Does there need to be an overhaul?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, we've got to bear in mind that, since we changed the operation of our managed isolation facilities in July last year and MBIE took over and the Defence Force played an increased role, this is the first time since then that someone has absconded. And so the system has been working well, but of course we have to learn the lessons of a situation like this. That's why we do the investigations that we do. But I think—you've said in your own question: this is not a prison; this is a place where we're keeping both the people inside safe but also making sure that the wider community knows that they can have confidence in it. We need to make sure we do everything to continue that confidence.

Media: Are there checks and balances in place, though? Because it seems like there weren't in this situation.

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, there's been significant audits done of all of the facilities to make sure that they are operating the way that we want them to, that they're safe environments, and we'll continue to look at those. There are also welfare checks done on those who are inside facilities, but there isn't a roll call at the start of the day. And, at that point, I do want to acknowledge the bubble that this person was in, because they have stepped forward and been extremely helpful in making sure that this situation was dealt with.

Media: Is the general security being put under pressure by the situation in Auckland and, obviously, the number of positive cases in that city and contingency quarantine having to be brought in? And how are you looking at that overall, in terms of whether every new contingency place is going to be up to scratch?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, that's been an important consideration as we've stood up both the Novotel and also the Holiday Inn that we're now standing up as well. There is a slightly increased staffing presence when it's a quarantine facility, but that mostly relates to the way in which we manage people in terms of their movements around the facility. But, you know, these facilities have already, in the case of this one, had the double fencing that is around the outside. It's already had the CCTV. It's already had security staff on site. I believe—I think there were nine on site on the night of the event. So the point is that we already have those facilities as secure as we can make them, but of course we'll take a look and see at how it goes.

Media: What is different between security at a managed isolation facility versus quarantine? What extra layer is required there?

Hon Grant Robertson: So, within the quarantine facilities, we have additional staff, because, obviously, if people are moving around and they have COVID, we want to restrict their movements; we want to make sure that they're kept away from others. So, for example, if someone in a quarantine facility is going to have exercise, they're accompanied by somebody in full PPE to make sure that they're kept away from others. That's an example of the situation. But every facility has high levels of security. Obviously something's gone wrong here, and if there needs to be increases in security presence, then we would make that happen. I'll let you finish, Jane, and then—

Media: Coming back to Jess'—a follow-on from Jess—is that more monitoring of CCTV? Is there more active monitoring than there would be in managed isolation? Or is it just like staffing levels?

Hon Grant Robertson: As I say, I can't answer that question today. As I said earlier, we're asking the same question of the monitoring of CCTV, and that may well be one of the lessons that comes out of here. But I do also just want to revert back to the important point here: that we have been advised that there is no risk to public safety from what has happened here. It doesn't make what happened here right, but I do want to reassure people we've gone back over that situation and assured ourselves of that.

Media: Were the police officers that apprehended the escapee yesterday full vaccinated?

Hon Grant Robertson: As far as I'm aware, those most closely involved were either fully or partially vaccinated.

Media: And, on that, then, is it appropriate for the police Minister to tell media to OIA that information if they want it, instead of her going away and figuring that out?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, I'm not aware of that comment. I've just given you the information I've got.

Media: But would you make that comment?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, I've given you the information.

Media: Was the MIQ facility told about the fact that this person had breached isolation rules twice before being moved to the isolation facility? And, if not, should they have been told, and was there a communication breakdown between the Ministry of Health and MBIE?

Hon Grant Robertson: So one of the things that happens whenever anyone enters a managed isolation and quarantine facility is that a risk assessment is done. One of the things that we will find through the investigation is what that risk assessment looked like and did it involved the issues that you've just raised. Bear in mind that, at each of these facilities, there are Police and Defence Force staff present. But, in terms of that specific bit of information, that will be part of the investigation that's under way.

Media: Well, they had breached isolation rules twice before being moved to this facility. So should they have had increased security around this person?

Hon Grant Robertson: I would certainly expect that that information, that that had occurred, would have been made clear to the MIQ—that would be a logical thing to do—but, as I say, that's the kind of information that will now emerge from the investigation we're doing.

Media: This might be one for Dr McElnay. The number of tests being carried out in Auckland seems to have dropped off quite substantially over the last few days. Some people are questioning whether the recording of those tests has changed from being Auckland regional tests to just the literal Auckland DHB. When you report the number of tests in the Auckland region, does that still refer to all Auckland DHBs or is that just now the Auckland DHB?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Yes, my understanding is there's been no change to the categorisation of those tests. What we are seeing is an expected drop-off because of the people who were at locations of interest. And, as we're in alert level 4 and as time has gone on, that has reduced the number of tests.

Media: Right. So I suppose you're sort of saying almost that there was an unnaturally high amount of tests initially—

Dr Caroline McElnay: Well, it was—

Media: And are you satisfied, then, that the current amount of testing in Auckland is OK for what you need it to be?

Dr Caroline McElnay: I think we had a large number of tests. That was being driven by the locations of interest and by the number of people who were close contacts. We would expect that to be a bulge that we've come through, but we're keeping a very close eye on the ongoing number of tests, because it's that ongoing testing that will give us the information about what is continuing to happen in Auckland as we are in alert level 4. So we're doing

some further work with Auckland Regional Public Health and with the Auckland DHBs to work out where we do need to target our testing to make sure that we've got that assurance that there's no undetected community transmission.

Media: Just back to the details of that time line, what time exactly did police arrive at the house, and did they, before going to that house, have adequate PPE on them, or was that a delay?

Hon Grant Robertson: I can't answer the second of those questions. I think a lot of people will have seen images where they are in full PPE when they are taking the abscondee into custody. In terms of exactly when they arrived at the house, I also don't have that exact time. It was some time, obviously, between when they were told at 11.10 and then they completed the custody at 2.05, but I don't have the exact time. Sorry, Jenna.

Media: And also you said that there was CCTV of the person in the bush. You also said the place is double fenced. So did they climb two fences to get out?

Hon Grant Robertson: They quite clearly would need to have done that—

Media: There wasn't, like, a gate left open, for instance?

Hon Grant Robertson: They would have quite clearly needed to have got across two fences. As I did say to you, they left down the fire stairwell. I'm not sure the exact location of the stairwell to the fences, but, regardless, they have to get over two fences.

Media: The Prime Minister said, on Monday, that decisions would be made this week about securing more vaccines to keep up with demand. Has the Government secured any more? Those administering vaccines want more clarity on this. So when do you have to dial back that demand, or have you got enough?

Hon Grant Robertson: We're still involved in those discussions and those negotiations, and they are progressing well. And, as soon as we've got something to say about them, we will. I know that the Ministry of Health stays in very close contact with both the DHBs and those that organise vaccine distribution at a local level, and they will continue to do that. And, as soon as we've got something to say about that, we will. We'll go to Jess.

Media: I've got a couple if that's OK. But, just following up on Jenna's, how concerned are you about the Māori rates of vaccination? Because they seem to have really dropped away.

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, we've known from the beginning, given the approach that we took with age cohorting, because there is a smaller proportion of Māori in the older age groups, that we wouldn't necessarily see that come through until we got to the younger age groups. But we now are in a position where every single New Zealander over the age of 12 is eligible to get a vaccine, and significant work is now going in with our Māori providers, led from us by Minister Henare, in making sure that we drive that programme home. We need as many New Zealanders as possible to be vaccinated, and we are going to be using every lever we can to make that happen.

Media: On the wage subsidy, are you aware of payments being slower to get to people this time? I know that three days is the preferred time period.

Hon Grant Robertson: No, not especially. There will always be situations where people's payments are a little delayed, and that is often because we're doing a data-matching exercise between the Ministry of Social Development and the Inland Revenue Department. And I know it sounds like quite a dull thing to dwell on, but it is very important that, when people are providing their information, it is the same as the information they have provided to Inland Revenue about their business. That is one of the things that's seeing people go into a pile where they have to be followed up. But, no, we're still getting the feedback most people are getting their applications processed within that period, but, of course, there'll be some who aren't.

Media: And, just on that glitch last night, that was a couple of hours that the website actually said the applications had closed. I know you say it's only for a couple of hours, but,

for people who were trying to get on to that, that's a bit of a panic for them, feeling like they've missed out on those two weeks. What happened there? Why haven't these systems—why aren't you getting it right yet?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, no, in fairness, as I said in the numbers that I put out earlier on, hundreds of thousands of applications have been processed. I did a calculation earlier in the week where applications were being processed at the rate of 13 per minute. So I think, actually, the system has worked well. We were in the last few hours, after it had been open for nearly a fortnight. My understanding is that, in preparing the website for the changeover at midnight, an error was made. As soon as that error was identified, it was rectified and was back up from 10 p.m. through until midnight. And, as I said earlier, if there is anyone out there who was on the website or was trying to get on the website in those two hours, they can contact the Ministry of Social Development directly and have their case dealt with.

Media: Was it media that alerted you to that?

Hon Grant Robertson: No.

Media: On the vaccine availability question that Jenna was asking about, the Prime Minister promised an update in a couple of days, more than a week ago, and during that time Australia has announced a vaccine swap with Singapore for 500,000 doses. Did Australia nick your vaccine? Where are you going to get this vaccine from?

Hon Grant Robertson: No, Ben, I would never say that about our Australian friends, and, no, that is not the case. I have no doubt that Australia had been working for some time before they were able to make that announcement. So I'm sure it didn't happen overnight. We're continuing to work on that. We're feeling very positive about the situation, but these are negotiations; these are sensitive discussions. And, therefore, when we've got an announcement to make, we will make it.

Media: On another issue: you're going to review alert levels settings on Monday. How quickly could you bring the South Island down to level 2, as there are increasing calls to do that?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, I'm not going to pre-empt the decision that we're going to make on Monday. That will be made on the latest public health advice that we have. But, obviously, we will continue to look for the things we always look for when we're debating alert level decisions: that is, the absence of cases, the absence of positive waste-water testing, making sure that all those contacts who had further testing to be done—that testing has been done as well. So these are the things we will always look for, and then Cabinet will take its decision from there.

Media: And, if everything looks good, how quickly could that decision happen? How quickly could it go down?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, you've seen that we normally give a little bit of notice for a decision like that, but we would do it as quickly as we could.

Media: Whānau Ora have rolled out a no-booking vaccine system. Is that something that could be looked at for other areas, particularly with a high Māori population?

Hon Grant Robertson: Again, I'll give Dr McElnay an opportunity to talk about this, but we want to use all of the levers we have, and we certainly know that Whānau Ora providers and other Māori health providers know their communities well and know what works, and so we are listening to them and adopting a very flexible approach in the way we do this. Dr McElnay?

Dr Caroline McElnay: No, I completely endorse what the Deputy Prime Minister said. We are open to all ideas and possibilities, because it's really important that we get our Māori rates up.

Media: And, also, testing essential workers crossing the border: we've had a lot of feedback. People are—you know, where did this come from; what does it mean? Can you give more detail about what's going to be required? And what consultation has gone on with the essential workforce or employers to get there?

Hon Grant Robertson: Sure. So, yesterday, Dr Bloomfield indicated that this was something that we wanted to happen. It wasn't being put out as a requirement—he was quite careful in this language; I listened to it—that this was something that we were wanting to see happen. Discussions are under way now around how to make that happen in a systematic way, and that, obviously, has to involve consultation with members of the industry. This is important because this is going to be an important way in which we can get increased confidence that that movement across the boundary isn't causing us to have concerns about future infections. I recognise it's something, when we turn it into a more systematic thing, requires a high level of cooperation and collaboration. One of the principles that we'll be applying to that is how we can make sure that it is least disruptive as possible to the movement of goods and so on. Dr McElnay, did you have anything to add to that?

Dr Caroline McElnay: No. I mean, as we've looked at the outbreak as a whole, we are very aware of the essential workers working in a level 4 environment, and also crossing the boundaries from a level 4 to a level 3. So they certainly are a group that we're very keen to get good information on their test status. But, as the Deputy Prime Minister says, it's certainly not a requirement at this point.

Hon Grant Robertson: We'll just come to Rukuwai—we'll just come to Rukuwai. Just—no, one over. I'll come back around; it's OK!

Media: Just a couple of things—on that Māori vaccination, firstly. Because of the low number of Māori being vaccinated at the moment, should there be a priority—like a first dose for Māori priority push?

Hon Grant Robertson: As I said earlier on, every New Zealander is now eligible, over the age of 12, and so we're encouraging everybody to do that. The way that we're trying to make sure we lift those rates is by working closely with Whānau Ora providers, Māori health providers—particular focus on rangatahi within that. Minister Henare, as I know, had spoken about that before. So that's where our push is coming. There isn't at the moment—you know, people can go to vaccination centres, they can make bookings, and, as has already been noted, those Whānau Ora providers are looking at flexible ways of delivering it. That's how we'll lift the rates of Māori vaccination.

Media: And also the map of close contacts—there was a lot of people in Te Tai Tokerau. How many people have returned those tests back? Are there people that are still waiting to be tested? What does that look like in Northland at the moment?

Hon Grant Robertson: I don't have a specific number on what it looks like in Northland. I do know that, as part of the decision to lift Northland to level 3, part of that was done on the basis of looking at testing and testing rates. But is there anything more on that?

Dr Caroline McElnay: I just can't recall the specific numbers at this moment, but we did look at those as part of our advice. There was a very high degree of testing that had come back from those people who had been identified as close contacts.

Hon Grant Robertson: We're just going to sweep across the middle here.

Media: Mr Robertson, can you expand on what the Government's looking into for residential rental rules under the level 4? Is there moves to—in terms of evictions and tenancies ending under lockdown?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, so we are taking a look at that issue. Currently, under level 4, enforcing an eviction is not allowed under the rules under alert level 4. The question that has been raised is the uncertainty that's created by somebody triggering an eviction during alert level 4, and so we are taking a look at that to assure ourselves of whether or not

that's a widespread issue. But alert level 4 movement restrictions mean that the enforcement of an eviction is impossible under alert level 4.

Media: And we've also heard reports of day-cares not opening under level 3 for the children of essential workers, and they can't access that same care that was available under level 4. Are you aware of those sort of issues for some parents?

Hon Grant Robertson: I haven't had that particular issue raised with us. As you're noting, under alert level 3, we do have those facilities open for essential workers. I'd be more than happy to follow up if there's a specific situation where somebody isn't able to access that service.

Media: A question for Dr McElnay: obviously, considering there's sort of 40-plus COVID-positive patients in Auckland—I understand there's requirements for clinicians looking after them—like they can't, obviously, have a lot of health issues themselves or have children. But, considering all that, are we—can you categorically say there are enough staff long term to cope with these patients, and how sustainable is it to seek support from outside of Auckland when, basically, every hospital in New Zealand's under a lot of pressure?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Well, that's the DHBs managing the specifics of the staff requirements in each of the hospitals. It's fantastic that the workforce from across the country have stepped in to help. It is something that we're very mindful of—there's a short-term issue versus a longer-term issue—and the ministry's working really closely with the DHBs across New Zealand to see how we can support in this particular situation.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, we'll come down to Marc, and then down to Luke, and then up the back again.

Media: Given that research has shown that, say, a 60-year-old Māori man has the same hospitalisation risk from COVID as an 80-year-old white man, do you have any regrets over that age prioritisation approach? Because it doesn't seem to risk based when you look at Māori and Pasifika. It just seems to be risk based when you look at white people.

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, that was the advice that we received when we were looking at the vaccine roll-out—was that we should start with the highest level of risk being at our border, and then work through health workers and then vulnerable populations. Bear in mind, we did do that, for example, surge vaccination in the South Auckland area as a result of some concerns there. But that is the advice that we got, and we are now in a position where we can vaccinate every New Zealander over the age of 12, and we want them to come forward. Dr McElnay, anything to add on that?

Dr Caroline McElnay: No, I think that's right, yes.

Media: Do you have any updates on the number of cases that are vaccinated and/or the number of people who are in hospital, thereabouts, maybe?

Hon Grant Robertson: I don't.

Dr Caroline McElnay: And I don't here, but we could get those numbers for you.

Media: Is the Government doing enough to financially support employees who have had their income cut off for various reasons and can't access the wage subsidy?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yes—so the first thing I'd say about that is employers can apply on behalf of casual workers, and I do think it's important that conversations take place between employers and their employees about making an application on that basis. Where that's not possible and where people are unable to be supported that way, this is why we have the Work and Income system and the Ministry of Social Development, and I do encourage people to make direct contact with the ministry if they are in that situation. When it comes to other areas such as students, for example, we continue to look at what our options will be around any further support we might be able to provide there, noting the existence of hardship funds that the Government's helped support on most campuses.

Media: Is the Government considering increasing the hardship—

Hon Grant Robertson: As I say, we're continuing to look at all of the supports that we give, and if there's anything more to say about that, we'll announce it.

Media: When it comes to extra vaccines for this month, the Prime Minister said that, if there is a shortage, it would only last for a couple of weeks, but my question is how quickly can you get vaccines from somewhere else in the world into the country given that we're a few days into this month already and we really probably need them here within the next few days or weeks?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, I mean, we're very aware of the importance of building on the momentum of the fantastic rate of vaccinations that we're seeing. I'm not going to get into the discussions, but I'm sure you're aware of how long it takes a plane to fly from different parts of the world to New Zealand, and so, obviously, we would move as quickly as we possibly could, if and when we secure vaccine, to bring it in.

Media: Can you give us an idea of the shortfall in terms of what expected deliveries are versus what you'd need to sustain?

Hon Grant Robertson: I mean, I'm not going to go into the specific numbers here right now, but what I think you've heard in recent days from us is that we are continuing to get deliveries from Pfizer. Those are coming in regularly. They allow us to meet the programme at the rate of the programme we have, but we've seen this fantastic surge. We want to keep building on that momentum, and so, obviously, we would be looking for supplies that allow us to meet that momentum.

Media: Minister, in the past few days, Stuff has done a few stories on primarily students from Auckland going to the airport and getting out, back from their various campuses—at least a couple of cases where no one checked anything, and there was one other: they misrepresented how essential they were. First of all, what is your understanding about how long the lax protocols have been in place in Auckland, and how many people do you think could, potentially, have gotten on planes when they're not eligible to do so? And has it been sort of plugged up—that hole?

Hon Grant Robertson: Just before I go through the detail of what's now in place at airports, I do want to note that, obviously, a system can only cope when people are being genuine about their intent, and so, if somebody is coming in, it is possible for them to convince people either through material they have or through what they say. It's very hard to design a system that stops that. In terms of what is the situation now, since 17 August, there has been a process in place, with AVSEC security officers in particular working, but over the last few days we've now put in place what is a six-step process. That is, that, when a passenger approaches the airport doors, the aviation security officer asks them for their boarding pass. If that is produced, they then talk to them about the purpose of their travel and see an eligibility document. If it meets the requirements for travel, they are then able to enter the airport. Up until that point, they can't actually enter the airport. If they don't meet those requirements, they're told not to enter. If they object, the police are called, and otherwise the matter is dealt with from there. So that process is in place now. We have had an expectation on the airports and on aviation security that they will be enforcing that, and I'm sure they're aware of that.

Media: And just one as sports Minister: police have issued a second warning to a group of MMA fighters in Auckland for breaching their bubble to train in level 4. As sports Minister, should there be exemptions for training given that their members have got an international fight coming up in three weeks?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, it is so important that everyone in the Auckland area sticks to the alert level 4 rules. I know they're tough. I know it's causing stress. I know there are people who want to be undertaking all manner of activities, be they training for a sports event or family activities. But, at the moment, we just need everyone in Auckland to obey the rules so that they can move down alert levels and get back to being able to do those sorts of activities. I'll take Aaron, and then I'll pop back over here.

Media: You said today that the MIQ abscondee was arrested, apprehended, around 2.05 yesterday afternoon. Why was the first official statement about the incident released at 2.36, saying they're preparing to arrest him—that was via police? I mean, do you think that the communication around this incident has been clear enough?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, this was a fast-evolving situation, and in the normal course of events, you know, you will often get different stories coming in over a period of time. We released the information we had as soon as possible. I can't comment on the internal mechanics of the Police's communications, but, as soon as we were able to talk about it, once the operation, the arrest, had been completed, that's what we did. But I can't comment on the difference between what happened at 2.05 and what happened at 2.36 for the Police.

Media: Minister, I just want to pick up on that point, because you don't always wait until an arrest has been made until you inform the public of a risk to their safety. If there was an active shooter in the community, you would tell the public, and if the Prime Minister knew about that, she would tell the public. So we're back to the question: why, if she knew about it, did she not tell the public about this?

Hon Grant Robertson: Because there was no advice that we received that there was a risk to public safety. The Police were in an active operation, and it would be irresponsible to come down here and talk about that while that active operation was under way without the details of the situation as we now know them.

Media: Why is that irresponsible?

Hon Grant Robertson: Because the Police need to be able to do their job.

Media: They can do their job as long—

Hon Grant Robertson: No.

Media: The Prime Minister can say something, and they can still do their job.

Hon Grant Robertson: No, they needed to be able to do their job without speculation or rumour around that. As soon as it was able to be talked about publicly, it was talked about publicly.

Media: Sorry, just a couple of questions for colleagues. Should—

Hon Grant Robertson: Sorry—Jane.

Media: Coming back to the testing at the border, what plan is there to actually monitor it at all? And, again, did you consult with the essential workforce about this plan? And how onerous is it potentially going to become, or is it just a request and will it always remain as that?

Hon Grant Robertson: As I said in my first answer, we're working towards a more systematic testing programme. All that Dr Bloomfield was doing yesterday was raising it. We'd like people who are moving across the border to be able to be tested. The consultation happens now, as we move from that position of it being an ask to it being something that we want to happen on a regular basis.

Media: So there will be a point where people will have to present proof of the test before they can cross that border?

Hon Grant Robertson: That's the work that we're working on now. I'm not going to pre-empt that, but we do want it to become a more systematic approach, and that's now going to be the subject of consultation that we're doing.

Media: And also can I ask, please, if you have ruled out completely any form of rental support for small businesses, as being called for by National, in terms of, you know, cash flow and potentially a different risk rating this year from banks willing to top up overdrafts, maybe, than last year.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, look, we continue to look at the support programmes that we have in place. The resurgence support payment was brought in specifically to deal with fixed costs such as rent, and so we'll be considering our options over the coming days. Obviously, we accept that the longer an outbreak goes on the more pressure that it puts on businesses, and so we will continue to look at our options. I'll take Rukuwai, and then I'll come back, Jess.

Media: Do you think that it would just be confusing for the public—we've heard the Government come out here and say this is more infectious, more contagious, and then to find out that someone escaped MIQ and then saying it's low risk to the public. Doesn't that just feed into the conspiracy theories—COVID isn't real, kind of stuff—that's floating around?

Hon Grant Robertson: No. No, I don't think so. What that's about is the fact that, as a result of the work that's been done, we've identified that this person didn't have contact with any members of the public—that they walked home in the middle of the night, and then got home and that the only contact they had was with others within that household, who were already in isolation. That's what we mean by low risk. Delta is a variant that we need to be very, very vigilant about, but we're talking about a specific situation here with a specific person.

Media: With the resurgence payment, would you consider doing that again for Auckland? So I know, at the moment, it's a one-off. Would you say, "Look"—after whatever time—"you now get that again."

Hon Grant Robertson: So what we're doing is we're looking at a range of options for what support we might provide if this outbreak continues. The resurgence support payment's a new payment during this particular outbreak; so we obviously want to look at its uptake and look at how it works. We've still got the wage subsidy scheme, and bear in mind, over this last fortnight we've just had, just around \$1.5 billion has gone out to support businesses in New Zealand.

Media: Can I ask you a question about Bluetooth? Why was the decision made to restart Bluetooth training, and if it's deemed unreliable, what's the point in doing that?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, I mean, it's another tool in the toolkit, and, obviously, you know, we continue to want people to scan. Even in higher alert levels, where there are limited places that you can go, it is still important to do that, and Bluetooth provides another additional piece of information for us. So that's why it's been put back in place. Dr McElnay, did you have anything to say about that?

Dr Caroline McElnay: No, that's right. It's part of the toolkit that we have to identify contacts.

Hon Grant Robertson: Jenna—your question's on behalf of others?

Media: Should non-border workplaces be allowed to mandate vaccines for staff and fire staff who refuse?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, so I know—I've been speaking, over the course of the last couple of weeks, with a number of businesses, and they are giving consideration to how they can ensure that the workers who work for them are vaccinated. The first and best way to do that is to have a conversation with the employee about the importance of it, to make sure that employers are providing time for people to go and be vaccinated, or other support to help them be vaccinated. That's the first, best way to make it happen, but, obviously, some employers are now giving consideration to whether or not they would make it compulsory. They'll need to do that in accordance with employment law—that is an important consideration—but, obviously, we want as many people to be vaccinated as possible, and I'm pleased that employers are considering their options as to how to make that happen.

Media: And why is it that Auckland hospital has a policy of allowing two visitors per patient when all other hospitals, even those in level 3, have stricter controls around visitors?

Hon Grant Robertson: I don't have a particular answer to that. Obviously, the way our health system runs is that district health boards manage their own facilities, and there are tight restrictions around who can be in hospital wards. But, Dr McElnay, I don't—

Dr Caroline McElnay: Only to say that the ministry does provide guidance, but then the actual implementation and application is the DHB.

Media: And, Dr McElnay, why did you fly to Auckland this week, and did you get a test before you left Auckland?

Dr Caroline McElnay: I went to Auckland as part of my role, to have direct oversight of the work that's under way with Auckland Regional Public Health. And, no, I did not have a test either before going or coming back. I practised full use of masks and PPE and physical distancing and can concur that Auckland public health, which is an essential business, is fully compliant with all of those protocols.

Hon Grant Robertson: We'll just take a few more from down here.

Media: Just a question for a colleague on greyhounds. As sports Minister, given that Greyhound Racing New Zealand is already pushing back against claims the industry is not transparent, do you have faith that it will dramatically improve transparency and data sharing by the end of next year?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, I don't think I could've made myself clearer: if they do not improve transparency, collection of data, and animal welfare, they are at risk of closure of the industry. So this is very much in their interests to get alongside the Racing Integrity Board and ensure that they do provide the information we need, that we can understand whether or not they're meeting their animal welfare requirements. And so I've got confidence in Sir Bruce Robertson, who did the report and who is now chairing the Racing Integrity Board, to follow up on that.

Media: It's probably one for you, Dr McElnay. Given that Delta seems to last longer than was initially expected, has there been any consideration given to extending MIQ stays for any cohorts that are currently in MIQ facilities?

Dr Caroline McElnay: I'll just clarify what you mean by Delta lasting longer: we certainly know that the infectious period can be longer for people who are cases of COVID-19 with Delta, and we have provided some technical advice to the clinicians and the medical officers of health who are releasing cases from isolation that they should have a longer period—it's quite detailed advice, but that there should be a longer period—before releasing those cases from isolation.

Media: So can you be a bit more specific on that?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Yes. At the moment, we have a protocol that is applied to each individual, and it's about when they stop being symptomatic—if they were symptomatic—and then there's been a buffer, and we've applied this since the beginning of 10 days. We've extended that buffer period to 14 days.

Media: Further to those questions about getting staff vaccinated, some employers have raised concerns that their obligation to their vaccinated staff means that it puts them in a difficult position re forcing other staff to get vaccinated, which they acknowledge they probably can't do. What's your read on employers' obligations to the safety of staff who do get vaccinated, and would you issue guidance to employers at all?

Hon Grant Robertson: I think you'll appreciate, Thomas, that this is an area where it's evolving thinking. As I said in my answer to Jenna before, people do have to obey employment law—that employment law doesn't disappear—but, obviously, there are different parts of employment law; that is, the direct contractual law and the health and safety obligations, which is what you're alluding to. I know there are a lot of conversations going on about that at the moment, and I'm not going to venture a legal opinion around the relative weight of one law against another law. What I would come back to is what I said before: the

very, very best thing that can happen is a conversation between employers and employees about vaccination, a conversation where people do think about their fellow workers, because we know that one of the things that will motivate someone to be vaccinated if they are perhaps somewhat hesitant is the impact that they have on their family, their friends, their colleagues. So that still remains the best thing to do.

Media: Do you, sort of, foresee a scenario by the end of the year, when every employee more or less has been offered a vaccination, where MBIE probably needs to issue some guidance to employers who are a wee bit confused about what to do with staff who literally just will not and do not want to be vaccinated?

Hon Grant Robertson: As I say, I'm not going to venture a legal opinion in that regard—no, I know what you're asking, but I just think, at the moment, that's a piece of work that's ongoing, that we need to understand more about. And this is global as well. I mean, you can do a little bit of reading around the world; you'll see that there are various court cases under way—people with different employment law than New Zealand, obviously, but that's what we're looking at. I'll just take a couple more: Jenna and then Ben—we'll finish with Ben.

Media: If the South Island moves towards level 2—hopefully for them—how is level 2 this time around likely to be different to level 2 last year?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, so I think I heard Dr Bloomfield mention when he was up here the other day that, in the advice that he would be bringing forward to Cabinet, should that be an option, he may well be looking at some modifications to level 2. We haven't had that advice yet from Dr Bloomfield, but I think that's a signal that, in the Delta environment, we need to look again at all elements of the alert level framework to make sure it's appropriate. So I imagine—I don't imagine; I know that, when the advice comes forward to us at Cabinet on Monday, if it includes advice to lower anywhere in New Zealand to alert level 2, there'll be some consideration as to what changes might be needed. I can't go into any details about that.

Media: Is it likely that we might see more encouragement, at least, for mask wearing at level 2 and perhaps some changes to the number of people in those group settings? Is that on the cards?

Hon Grant Robertson: As I say, we haven't had that advice yet; so we'll await to get it on Monday. I'll finish with Ben.

Media: On greyhounds, that report was harrowing: more than 900 dog deaths since 2007; 107 deaths in the first seven months of this year. Obviously, there were problems with transparency and other issues, but, plainly, animal welfare is the main game. What's an acceptable level to the Government of greyhound deaths each year?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, I'm not going to put a number on that, but I agree with you that the number of dogs who have been euthanised and the injuries that we have seen to greyhounds are not acceptable. And it's one of the main reasons that we undertook the review, and it's one of the main reasons that we've now given a notice period for this industry. I too found the report quite tough going to read, but I'm very pleased with it, and I would highly recommend to anybody interested in this issue to read Sir Bruce Robertson's report, partly because he raises the issue that we have widely, diametrically spread views on this issue. You've got an industry with people who are genuinely committed to greyhound racing, and you have a great number of New Zealanders very concerned about animal welfare. We have laid down some very clear markers about what we believe needs to change, and we've given a time line for that.

Media: But it's not going to be zero, is it? Like, if greyhound racing does have some deaths, and if that—

Hon Grant Robertson: Similarly to other forms of racing as well, but they are significantly limited. All right, we're going to leave—

Media: Hasn't that industry had enough warning?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, look, my view is that as, the Minister of racing—I only came into the portfolio towards the end of last year—I think the thing I'm trying to achieve here is to give them very specific indicators that they have to meet with a specific time line. I'm not sure that's happened before, but I'm going to take responsibility for my role now as the Minister of racing. Thanks, everybody, and I hope everybody has a restful weekend.

conclusion of press conference