

**ALL-OF-GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCE: FRIDAY, 8 OCTOBER 2021  
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Kia ora, everybody. Good evening. Ministers convened this evening after receiving additional information on the movements of an individual who travelled to Northland this week. Based on advice from public health officials, we have agreed to move Northland to alert level 3 from 11.59 p.m. this evening, for an initial period of four days until 11.59 p.m. on Tuesday night. Cabinet will review these settings when it meets again on Monday. This measure is being taken out of an abundance of caution, given that there aren't, at this point, additional identified cases in Northland that we are aware of. It is also being taken, however, because the individual has not been cooperative with contact tracing efforts. We haven't been able to identify their exact movements, and we do have some information to suggest that they were not travelling alone. Our understanding at this stage is that the person was in Northland from the afternoon of 2 October until the evening of 6 October. Based on information from the police, we believe they've travelled widely around the region, including in Whangārei, Kamo, Paihia, and Kawakawa, before returning to Auckland. Initial locations of interest are the BP Connect at Wylies at 49 Maunu Road in Woodhill, Whangārei between 11.20 p.m. and 12.20 a.m. on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of October; at the Z Kensington service station on the corner of Kamo Road and Nixon Street, Whangārei from 3.45 p.m. to 4.45 p.m. on 4 October.

The other factor that we have taken into account is that vaccination rates in Northland are low compared to the national average, and without placing restrictions on movement, there is a possibility that the virus could spread quite rapidly within the community. Vaccination rates in Northland sit at 70 percent for first dose, and 48 percent for second. For Māori that rate is lower at 52 percent first dose and 32 percent fully vaccinated.

Similar to our recent move to alert level 3 in the Waikato, cases spreading at alert level 2 are a risk that we cannot take. But it's also further reason why we need to really focus on vaccinations. Without high vaccination rates we'll need to continue to use restrictions to stop the virus spreading. So I have two things to ask of Northlanders. First, if you have any cold and flulike symptoms, please come forward and get a test as soon as possible. Testing centres are operating throughout the region, including at Kaitiāia Hospital, 1 Sammaree Place in Kerikeri, the Dargaville Hospital, and 20 Winger Crescent in Kamo, and Pohe Island in Whangārei. Also keep checking the Ministry of Health website, where we will update on any further locations of interest as we manage to get that information.

The second request that I have, and I can't stress this enough, is please get vaccinated. These cases do highlight the risks of COVID-19 to the unvaccinated anywhere in the country. We've seen the Delta outbreak jumping borders and finding unvaccinated people. I know a lot of people are happy to get vaccinated but they're waiting, saying that they're not quite sure whether they're ready to get vaccinated yet. With low vaccination rates across the Northland region, now is the time to be vaccinated to protect your children, vulnerable people in your communities, your elders, and loved ones. Information on vaccine centres that will be available over the weekend is on the Healthpoint website. You can also go to [bookmyvaccine.nz](https://bookmyvaccine.nz) to see what locations are available close to where you live.

A reminder that alert level 3 means that you need to stay in your bubble and stay at home, you need to limit your movement. That's how we'll break the chains of transmission, if any have already been spreading within the community. So please don't go and visit family, friends, and neighbours. This is a virus that can spread quite quickly and that is part of the way it spreads. We do need you to stay home, to get tested, and to get vaccinated,

**Media:** Minister, Northland has been left in limbo for many hours, with no locations of interest, no indication about what's going on. Why did it take so long?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** It has been very difficult to get information about this particular case. The first test result we had was what you could describe as an indeterminate test result, so

it was quite difficult to locate the person. The information that they supplied when they were tested the first time did not provide sufficient information to be able to contact them with the test result and get them back to be tested. It took quite some time to track them down. The police, ultimately, were able to assist there and did help to track the person down, then had to get the second test result. They have not been particularly forthcoming with their movements.

**Media:** Has the person got gang affiliations and are they cooperating with the process?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** The person's not cooperating with the process, and I don't have any information to suggest, at this point, that there are gang affiliations.

**Media:** What you mean by that, though?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** I don't have information one way or the other to confirm whether or not they're involved in a gang or have any connection with a gang. That information has not yet been determined.

**Media:** What are their reasons and rationale for not cooperating with health officials?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Well, they haven't given one, and so at this point I don't know why they're not providing the information.

**Media:** Why was the person allowed to travel to Northland and back to Auckland?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** My understanding was that the person—my understanding at this point, and I want to be clear that this is not yet verified, is that the person obtained a document by providing false information in order to get the document to travel across the border. By the time the falsity of that information had been identified and the document had been revoked, they were already in Northland at that point.

**Media:** So what were they doing in Northland? What was the purpose of them being up there?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Don't have that information. They have not supplied the reason for being there. My understanding is that they obtained a—if this is correct, that the travel document they obtained was under the social services category and that when the evidence that they supplied was reviewed, that exemption, that permit, if you like, to travel was revoked.

**Media:** Do you have any idea of the number of contacts it has? You said it's travelled widely, but do you know—ballpark figure?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No, we don't. That's partly because the person themselves hasn't been providing that information. The information that we have has been what the police have been able to identify so far using their networks, and so at this point the information's still pretty patchy.

**Media:** And the person that they travelled with, are they also in managed isolation now?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No, and it's been very difficult to identify who that person is. My understanding—and this is only very recent, so I haven't been able to verify that—is that person has now been identified, and so work will be under way to try and track that person down.

**Media:** Do you have any idea where they are?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No, I don't, sorry.

**Media:** Minister, can I just clarify a couple of things? So is the first person a woman or a man?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** My understanding is that they're both women.

**Media:** OK, and, I mean, if police had to step in to help, one could assume that they had gang affiliations?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Not necessarily. This person, from what I gather, is just not being cooperative and is not providing information, and the police are involved in the process where that happens so that we can try and get as much information as we can. And the police, of course, have ability to access other sources of information: CCTV, and all of the other sources of information the police might have access to. That's how, through the police, we've been able to patch together the information that we have at this point.

**Media:** Are they not providing information because of the places that they've been [*Inaudible*] related to illegal activity, or is it something else?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** I don't have that information. I don't know why they are not providing information.

**Media:** Have you set up any testing stations in the Bay of Islands, and, if not, why not, given they visited Kawakawa and Paihia?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Further testing will be available tomorrow. Details of that, of course, are being worked through at the moment. We will release information on where any additional testing sites will be. That will be identified overnight and be released first thing tomorrow morning.

**Media:** Would you have locked down in this case if vaccination rates were the same as, say, Wellington?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** The low vaccination rates certainly are a factor, and it does lead to increased risk, so I wouldn't necessarily want to give a hard and fast answer either way, but certainly the low vaccination rates were something we took into account when we made the decision.

**Media:** Minister, how much of a fear has this been for you, having a region that's got—"fear" isn't the right word, sorry. I mean, having the low vaccination rates, this is almost, you know, a frustrating scenario for it to be Northland. How do you feel about that?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** A concern over the last year and a half that I've been involved in this response has been that COVID would find its way into the harder to reach parts of our population and that would make case investigation, contact tracing, that much more difficult, and that is certainly what we have been seeing over the last couple of months. COVID has found its way into parts of the community that are harder for us to work with in terms of, you know, contact tracing. We're seeing really good cooperation across a large number of those people, though, so I don't want to stereotype everyone that's involved here, but there are examples where it has been much more difficult, and this is probably the starkest of those, where we have someone who has clearly had quite a lot of movement and hasn't been willing to share the details of that movement.

**Media:** At what point do you consider, if the person is not—if they're not going to be cooperative, at what point do you consider releasing more information about the person so that anyone that's been in contact with them can self-identify and come forward to you instead?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** I wouldn't take that off the table. We're not at that position yet. The police are involved in helping to try and get information, but at this point we're not at that stage yet, but I certainly would not rule that out completely. We'll share information that we have, and I just have shared the information that we've been able to piece together, and we will have to continue to do that if the person isn't cooperative.

**Media:** You could release photos of them for instance?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** We are not at that point at this stage.

**Media:** What link is there, if any, that you're aware of between this case and the cases that are in Auckland who, you know, are just sort of less inclined to cooperate with authorities and trust authorities on purpose? Is there a link there?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** We don't know yet. There's a lot that we don't know about this case. So we don't necessarily know how the person themselves came into contact with COVID-19 in the first place; so that's one of the things that makes this very difficult. We will, I hope, get whole genome sequencing, which should be able to link back to other results that we have in the Auckland area and give us a bit more of an idea about which part of the cluster we're dealing with, where the link is likely to have been, but we haven't got that information yet.

**Media:** Will you be looking at whether there are any sort of systemic deficiencies in the essential worker system? Does this—you know, the fact that this person managed to get this document based on falsified information. Does that suggest the Government needs to look at whether there are any wider problems?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Yes, we will, of course, look at that. One of the big challenges around having internal land-based borders is that you have to have a process that's reasonably efficient, in terms of processing requests, but also reasonably thorough, and those two things can create some tensions there between trying to give people speedy answers to their applications, particularly where the travel may be time sensitive, for example, but also making sure that it's thorough. And so in this particular case the person managed to get a travel document. It would appear at this point, that the information they supplied in order to get that was not correct. It was then reviewed, and the travel document was revoked, but that's all the information I have about that at the moment, but, of course, we will look closely at that process and see whether there's anything further that we need to do there.

**Media:** And so might you look to tilt that balance towards thoroughness, perhaps at the expense of speed?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** It's always a difficult trade-off there in the sense that in some cases you do need to move quickly in order to give people that permission they need to travel across the boundary. But, of course, we'll certainly keep looking at that.

**Media:** You've outlined that this person basically frauded documents. They've been uncooperative with police. You and Cabinet must be furious. What's your thinking at this stage?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Look, it's very disappointing. By and large we've seen good cooperation amongst New Zealanders who have contracted COVID-19. Again, it's worth remembering and worth reminding ourselves all of the time that COVID-19 is the problem not the people. People can be the solution. You know, there's no blame. There's no blame or shame associated with contracting COVID-19, but we do ask people to cooperate because it helps us to prevent other people getting COVID-19. So it is incredibly disappointing when people aren't cooperative because it puts more people at risk of getting COVID-19, and it means that we are forced into making decisions without the information that we would like to have.

**Media:** Minister, you've released two locations of interest so far, and they're both petrol stations. Do you have any—obviously, this has been hard with the uncooperativeness. Do you feel like there will be more locations of interests that are, you know, hospitality venues, that kind of thing? Or is it likely to stay as—you know, retail, like petrol stations, where the risk is slightly lower?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** So the information that we've got at the moment is we don't really know much about what happened between petrol station visits. So we can place the car in certain places and that gives us, you know, a bit more of an idea about where the potential movement was, but we don't know the nature of that movement or the activities undertaken or who they were coming into contact with.

**Media:** When you say you've placed the car, was that using CCTV at the petrol station or a similar thing? Was that not at all cooperation?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** That information's come from the police, so it will be using police's investigations.

**Media:** [*Inaudible*] told you anything at all about where they've gone?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No. Not really. The information that I've shared so far is about the extent of what we know.

**Media:** Minister, are you aware of their occupation?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No, I'm not.

**Media:** *Newshub's* been told that the woman is a sex worker. Can you confirm that?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No, I can't.

**Media:** Do they have a criminal record of anything?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** I don't have that information.

**Media:** But you must have theories about their intentions in the north.

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Look, we can all have theories but I don't have any confirmed information on that.

**Media:** But you've got officials that are very well placed to make those assertions. They must be well known to police, this person?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Look, I don't have that information.

**Media:** Do you know the names? You seem to not know, like, much at all.

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No, I don't have their name.

**Media:** Just to be clear, though, you haven't been briefed about what they do for a job or that they are sex workers?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No, I have not had that information.

**Media:** Would you expect to, if sources are telling news outlets—is that something you should be briefed on, given—

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** We generally don't get people's occupational information unless it is directly relevant to the investigation. And at this point I haven't got any information to make a judgment either way on whether it's directly relevant to the investigation or not.

**Media:** Are you worried that there will be more cases like this with Auckland being in restrictions for so long? Where people will be at the end of their tether and they will do things like falsify documents to leave the city. Not everyone, but, you know, more and more at the edges.

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Not necessarily what we are seeing from Aucklanders, and, again, I just really want to compliment Aucklanders for doing the hard yards on behalf of the rest of the country, again. Aucklanders, I think, are doing their bit, and the vast majority of Aucklanders have been doing absolutely the right thing and making the sacrifices that they need to make and that we're asking them as a country to make, and I thank them for that. So I don't want to have the collective efforts of Aucklanders have a shadow cast upon them by the actions of one person, or to jump to the conclusion that there's going to be more of that because of the actions of this particular person.

**Media:** Did you consider a level 4 for Northland, just given that you don't yet know the source at the moment, movement is quite widespread, and vaccination numbers are low. If level 4 wasn't considered, might it be considered?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Level 3 is still quite a high threshold, you know, quite a high response, given that we don't—at this point—have other positive cases. One of the reasons that we're moving to level 3 is if further positive cases come to light in the next 24, 48, 72

hours, even, to move at that point means we've lost valuable time. So we're doing this now so that we don't find ourselves in that position.

**Media:** Is it fair to say you expect more cases in Northland?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** I think it is certainly very possible. If we don't see additional cases I'll be very happy but it is certainly very possible. We wouldn't be doing this if we didn't think it was very possible that there would be more cases.

**Media:** Did she provide contact—because, you know, there was a weak positive case and then she was let go, probably normal procedure then to provide a contact, which then turned out to be false?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** My understanding is that the phone numbers and contact information provided when the person went to be tested did not—the phone numbers were not valid and it was very difficult to locate the person.

**Media:** She didn't want to be located, basically?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** That would appear to be the case.

**Media:** Would the Government consider offering immunity from any criminal charges in exchange for cooperation, if that was what was needed to encourage this person to actually tell officials where they'd been?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Let's be very, very clear about this: our public health officials, when they are interviewing people as part of contact tracing, do not use that information for any other purpose other than eliminating the risk of COVID-19. They don't share that information with the police for the purposes of criminal investigation, for example. Where police are involved, it is because we need the police to be involved to help us get information. But the public health teams are not collecting information that's then passed on and used in other law enforcement procedures. Because to do so would mean that people wouldn't provide the information in the first place.

**Media:** Sure, and is that made explicit during these contact tracing interviews?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Absolutely.

**Media:** Can I get a sense of the time line here? You said that this person has had a false certificate, but then you've become aware that it was forged. When did you become aware that it was forged? Was it before they were caught or after?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** So my understanding is that the travel document was revoked on the 5<sup>th</sup>.

**Media:** So why was it revoked? This is obviously before you knew that this person—

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** So there's a review of all of those applications. This one was audited, if you like, and revoked on the strength of the—I don't think they use the word "audit"—but on the strength of the review that was undertaken, that document was then revoked.

**Media:** So that's the 5<sup>th</sup>, today's the 8<sup>th</sup>. What happened in the last three days?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** We've been trying to find the person, get them tested, and try and get information from them.

**Media:** So they've been on the run, essentially, for three days?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** My understanding is that they arrived back in Auckland late on the 6<sup>th</sup>, and we have been attempting to locate them and to get an additional test.

**Media:** But if you didn't know that, why did you not put Northland into a precautionary level 3 sooner because you had absolutely no information about where this person had been or was?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** As I said, I think, at the time, when we were asked to comment on that particular result, the first result was relatively indeterminate. It was a very, very high CT

value, so it was quite possible that it was either a false positive or it was a historic infection, and we do see those get thrown up from time to time, and the answer there is to find the person and to retest them, which is exactly what the team were focused on doing. Moving up alert levels every time there's a potential false positive would create a huge amount of uncertainty because they do spring up on a relatively regular basis.

**Media:** Zooming out a little bit, the locked down area has now expanded to three new regions over the space of the last week. There are rule breakers, there's gang involvement. Is it a matter of time before the virus spreads to other nearby towns and places? Should Kiwis mentally prepare themselves for a degree of lockdown or a degree of Delta in their communities sooner?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Look, my advice to all New Zealanders, who are following this closely, I'm sure, is that getting vaccinated is the very best thing that we can all do at this point. There is the possibility that COVID-19 could pop up anywhere, that is the risk of dealing with a human virus. We do everything we can to avoid that from happening. We are absolutely working around the clock to try and isolate the risk here, but the best thing every New Zealander can do to contribute to that effort is to make sure that they and the people who they care about, and the people who they know, are getting vaccinated.

**Media:** Does the spread give you pause for thought on your idea to phase out restrictions in Auckland? Is it time to just hit pause on that idea?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** These restrictions, the ones in the Waikato, and the ones in Auckland will all be reviewed by Cabinet on Monday. And, of course, all of those factors will be on the table when we do that review.

**Media:** And, just finally, the five new cases in the Waikato today, the Ministry of Health didn't reveal whether they were inside the lockdown boundary or not. Should they provide that peace of mind and share where those cases were actually from?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Sorry, I don't have that information in front of me. I've, obviously, been focused on the Northland case in the last couple of hours. Happy to provide that for you. But I don't want to get into a broader conversation about everything to do with COVID; so, happy to do more questions on the Northland issue, though.

**Media:** Just a follow-up on Sam's question: the person, obviously, breached the rules by falsifying the details for the travel document. Would you consider not pressing charges for that in an effort to regain cooperation from the person?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Certainly the best way forward at this point is if we can get that person to be cooperative and to provide information, and so I wouldn't rule out that at this point. But we want them to be cooperative. And one of the challenges here is that the harder lined you become, the more likely it is people stop cooperating. This person's not cooperating now, but if there are things we can do to get them cooperating, of course, we'd be looking at that.

**Media:** And do we know if they're vaccinated?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No, sorry, I don't have that information.

**Media:** Can I just clarify: so they got tested when they got the weak positive, why did they come forward to be tested then? Was that because they needed—

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Don't have information on that. And the person—

**Media:** Because they cooperated then.

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Yeah, that's right. And the person hasn't shared information on the reason for them going to get tested. So, at this point, I just don't have that information.

**Media:** Have you lost control of this outbreak?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No. Last couple of questions.

**Media:** Do you know the residency status of this person?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** No.

**Media:** Do you have a sense of how close, if close at all, the police are to locating the woman's contact?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** My understanding—I mean, this was only in the last sort of—you know, very briefly before I came down here that they'd identified who the person was. They may have some information on their whereabouts. But I don't know the answer to where they are, but they were getting quite close to being able to find that information out.

**Media:** In Auckland, though, or in Northland?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** That is my understanding, is it's likely to be Auckland. But I don't want to confirm that because I don't have that information. All right. Thanks, everybody.

**Media:** Minister, will you do another update tomorrow at 1, or is that not decided yet?

**Hon Chris Hipkins:** Not decided yet.

**conclusion of press conference**