

**ALL-OF-GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCE: FRIDAY, 1 OCTOBER 2021  
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Kia ora. Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou katoa. Nau mai, haere mai ki tēnei hui pāpaho—welcome to the press conference, everybody. I will hand over to the Director of Public Health to update you on the latest case numbers, and then I'll make a few brief comments before taking your questions. Dr McElnay.

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Thank you, Deputy Prime Minister, and kia ora koutou. Today, I can report 19 new community cases, all in the Auckland region. Of today's cases, only one is yet to be linked to another case. Also, of yesterday's cases, again, only one case remains unlinked at this point, and investigations are ongoing. And over the past 14 days, there are nine cases whose links are yet to be established. Our progress continues. Many of our clusters are now considered to be contained—that is: any new cases are among known contacts who are already isolating, or dormant; that is: they have not given rise to any new cases in the past 14 days.

So there are five active sub-clusters where there have been cases emerging in unknown contacts, and our public health efforts are heavily focused on containing those sub-clusters. It is this work which continues to give us a level of reassurance that we are finding and reducing the spread of the Auckland outbreak. It's clearly good to see a levelling off of the case numbers today, and today's numbers are consistent with yesterday's.

Delta's high infectiousness within households underpins the numbers that we are continuing to report each day. We know from the number of already notified cases that there could be an estimated additional 35 cases in coming days among household contacts, so we are expecting fluctuation in our daily numbers.

There are 23 patients in hospitals today. Two of these are recovered cases; all are in the Auckland area, with four patients in ICU. Last night, we reported that there had been two further exposure events at Middlemore Hospital on Wednesday night. The second patient, who had self-discharged, is being managed by the Auckland Regional Public Health Service and has been isolating at home. Today, they are being moved into a quarantine facility. Of the 34 patients who were considered contacts, following the two exposure events, a further six have now been discharged. They are being followed up by public health along with the other 32 outpatients who were considered contacts.

And we just want to reiterate that while there's been a number of exposure events at Middlemore Hospital, this is not unexpected as there are sub-clusters in South Auckland for which Middlemore is the local hospital. In addition, Middlemore is the receiving hospital for a number of quarantine facilities in the area and, as such, regularly receives COVID-suspect as well as COVID-positive patients from these facilities. Where patients do present from these facilities, Middlemore is able to plan for their arrival and manage their treatment accordingly. The clinical staff at Middlemore are doing an excellent job at managing the situation. It is important that people get help when they're sick and know that our hospitals are safe, and our Auckland hospitals in particular are now very well used to dealing safely with COVID-19 patients. This includes adhering to strict infection prevention and control measures, including the use of appropriate PPE.

Just an update on the worker from the Naumi managed isolation facility who was mentioned yesterday. They are in a quarantine facility, and Auckland Regional Public Health are working with the MIQ to identify close or casual contacts amongst their workers, and are also investigating the source of the infection. We're still awaiting whole genome sequencing results, which will help determine whether this is a community case or a border-related case.

On testing, testing remains essential to our control of the outbreak, and it is good to see high numbers of tests being undertaken each day. There were more than 11,000 tests taken across Auckland yesterday and more than 19,000 processed nationwide. There has also been a strong turnout for testing in our two new suburbs of interest which were announced yesterday, with 360 swabs taken in Henderson and 292 taken in Papakura. So a big thankyou to everyone who came forward. There was a total of 1,152 swabs taken across our seven suburbs of interest yesterday. I also want to report that there was really good use of a pop-up testing site at Bunnings Warehouse in Manukau yesterday. A big thankyou to Bunnings, who assisted with that by texting registered tradies to let them know that the testing was available. That pop-up site will continue into next week, as long as the demand continues. And so the key message around testing is: get tested—use this weekend to continue to get tested.

On essential workers: I want to acknowledge our essential workers and the crucial role that they play and have played in keeping us safe from COVID-19. We have had reports of abuse and even physical violence towards essential workers and people working at the Auckland air and land boundaries and in our supermarkets and on Healthline. I know that this is a tough situation for everyone, but this sort of behaviour does and can have significant impact on the mental wellbeing of our essential workers, so I'm asking New Zealanders to please be kind and treat our essential workers with courtesy and respect.

And, finally, I'd like to mention a new initiative to get more Aucklanders vaccinated, which has been launched today at Papakura Marae and is led by the metro Auckland GPs. This initiative is specifically for GPs with Māori and Pacific patients who have yet to receive their first vaccinations—we estimate that's about 110,000 people. So this initiative means that those GPs will be calling their patients to understand what barriers stand in their way and to see how they can be supported to get vaccinated. Vaccination, coupled with appropriate public health measures, is our ticket back to the freedoms we enjoyed and reconnection with the wider world. We've made more than a great start, so let's sustain the effort.

Back to you, Deputy Prime Minister.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Ngā mihi, Dr McElnay. To pick up just a couple of comments that the Director of Public Health has made, the first of those is that it remains encouraging that in today's numbers we have only one unlinked case, and that person is being interviewed as we speak. And it is important for us to note that the case numbers have been relatively stable in the last couple of days, but they continue to represent expected cases or cases of either household contacts or other contacts, but we must not be complacent. And one of the things I'm urging people in Auckland this weekend to do is get tested. We saw 19,000 tests across New Zealand; that's an excellent number and we want to keep that level of testing up over the weekend. So I do say, if anyone has any symptoms, that they please do go and get tested this weekend. It will be one of the things that Cabinet will be thinking about when we're making decisions on Monday as our confidence that we are getting the level of testing we need to understand that we continue to have this outbreak under control. And, of course, take the opportunity this weekend to be vaccinated as well. There are still many, many places available for people to do that.

Just a couple of other brief remarks before we take questions. The first of those is to note that the fourth round of the wage subsidy scheme opened for applications at 9 o'clock this morning. The revenue test period covered by this round is 28 September through 11 October. So far, since this outbreak began, 652,103 applications for the wage subsidy have been approved with \$3.3 billion paid out. A new round of the resurgence support payment will open for applications next Friday. So far, \$914 million has been paid out to help businesses with fixed costs through the resurgence support payment. In total, that's \$4.2 billion of economic support that has been provided since this August outbreak began.

I'm also pleased to announce today that the Government is extending its support for the aviation sector. The current arrangements to support air services were due to expire at the end of October, but the flow-on impacts of the COVID global pandemic continue to affect

international air movements, and New Zealand does remain at risk of losing some important international air capacity. The Maintaining International Air Connectivity scheme has been extended to the end of March next year to help meet demand over the peak summer cargo season. Officials have already begun working with airlines to agree on the services that will be supported over summer. I can tell you that, since May last year, this scheme that the Government has funded has enabled more than 8,800 flights carrying over 169,000 tonnes of air freight worth around \$13.5 billion. During the same period, nearly 85,000 people have returned to New Zealand on those flights—45 percent of the total number of people who have passed through our MIQ facilities.

And a reminder that workplaces will be required to display additional COVID-19 QR codes throughout their premises from 11.59 p.m. on Tuesday, 5 October. The current requirements only require one QR code to be displayed at the entrance place, and this can deter people from scanning in, particularly at businesses where there is a queue to scan in at the main entranceway, and physical distancing can then become a challenge. The aim of the changes is to limit potential barriers for people recording their visit when visiting businesses and locations, and ensures people are given as many opportunities as possible to scan in, and these should be as easy and accessible as possible. Scanning is one of the best ways to speed up contact tracing and ensure it is as much of an automatic process as can be. Delta moves quickly, and, therefore, contact tracing needs to move even faster, and scanning remains very important to that. More information about these requirements and access to QR posters can be found on the Unite against COVID website.

**Media:** Minister, what's not working properly at hospitals? Why are we seeing so many cases and contacts there?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I don't think it's a question of things not working properly. As the Director of Public Health has said, if we take Middlemore specifically, Middlemore is the hospital that services the communities where this outbreak has been concentrated in. Some people are arriving at the emergency department, being completely unaware that they might have COVID but, because of the protocols at the hospital, they're getting tested, and then we're learning about their status as a result of that. We've also seen some cases recently where people have arrived quite unwell and had to be admitted. Obviously, we're asking people, at any sign, to get tested, but there will be some people for whom that doesn't occur. It is not a problem at the hospitals. The hospitals are the solution here. They're dealing with the cases well. They have protocols in place to deal with them. But they will be a centre of where people who are feeling unwell will go.

**Media:** Are the processes not working, though, if they're turning up when they're unwell, aren't taking the proper precautions, if they then test positive later on, are things like masks and hygiene and all of that stuff not working?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No, I don't believe so at all. In the case of the two examples given by Dr McElnay—in one of those cases the person left before they had the result of their test. In the other case, the person was dealt with with all of those things in place. When you hear about contacts, that's out of an abundance of caution to make sure that we don't let anybody slip through the net there. It's not that there is a particular concern that there's a problem, but Dr McElnay—

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** That's right—no, that's right. It is. It's policies and procedures that kick in, and it is out of an abundance of caution, and the Auckland Regional Public Health then systematically work through those contacts and are able to release them once they've got that further information.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** We do also really, you know, want to make sure that people retain their confidence in our public hospitals. It's important that people go there if they are feeling unwell, and know that the protocols and procedures are in place to keep them safe.

**Media:** Are you aware of any situations where a COVID-positive person has been allowed to stay at home in isolation, but they and their family then walked around the community anyway?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I'm not aware of a specific situation of that type. What I am aware of is that from time to time, and I think Dr Bloomfield covered this the other day, people do end up staying at home for very specific reasons, with agreement of the medical officer of health in Auckland. That can be because, for example, they have a medical condition that requires them to stay at home, or a disability or something of that sort. I'm not aware of a specific case of people who've been given that dispensation then moving around, but Dr McElnay?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** No, I don't. I'm not aware of any either, and there are very strict protocols put in place for those individuals who, for whatever reason, as the Deputy Prime Minister says, are allowed to stay in their own home.

**Media:** Yeah. What kind of strict protocols are in place? You're not just putting them at home and then hoping that they stay there, right?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** No—no. No, there's a range of activities. There's the information that they're given about what's expected if there's other people in the household so that they're completely separate. There's often security arrangements that can be put in place to make sure that people are actually staying at home and staying where they need to be. There are daily contacts made—you know, phone calls made with those individuals to check on their wellbeing, because these are people that are cases. So there's a whole range of arrangements that are put in place.

**Media:** Can you give an assurance that anyone who is isolating at home is being treated or managed the same way, effectively, as they would be managed in a quarantine facility?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Yes, they are. They're being managed to contain any risk of infection, and it's a very small number of exemptions that are given for people, and usually it's because there are some other factors that have to be taken into account in order to manage that person's health and wellbeing. So, yes, the restrictions around the possibility of any spread of infection are just as tight as they would be if they were in a facility.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** And I just want to reiterate: it is a very small number. The discussions that I've been present in where these cases have been mentioned, all of the issues that you're raising are the ones that are discussed—you know, what is the appropriate security arrangement, how are they monitored, how are they being supported in terms of food and provisions? So all of those things are discussed on a case-by-case basis to provide a level of certainty and security.

**Media:** So it would be a quite surprising scenario, then, if household members of a COVID case were out in the community?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Yes.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** It certainly would be, and, obviously, if there are situations you want to draw our attention to, please feel free to.

**Media:** Can you say, Dr McElnay, if any of today's cases have come from the testing that's happened in the 40 transitional housing places that has started, and when that testing might be finished?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Well, that testing continues. That's a rolling programme. The expectation, I think, is for that to be completed next week. I'm not aware of the precise location of testing for the cases that came in today. There is only one that is unlinked. There are a high number of the cases today who were known household contacts. So that's a different situation. We'll be able to provide further information on the testing results by location in due course once we've completed that testing.

**Media:** Scott Morrison has announced the opening of Australia's international border from December, with seven days of home quarantine for vaccinated travelling. What impact will this have on ever reopening the bubble with Australia?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, as you know, the reconnecting New Zealanders plan moves us to a position, as we go into the first quarter of next year, where we will be making it significantly easier for people to return to New Zealand, to our citizens, and, obviously, looking at a graduated system for people from other countries as well. You also will be aware that we've been discussing, a number of times in recent days, our desired move to more use of self-isolation. That's why the self-isolation pilot is under way, and we want to look at that in the first part of next year as well. We've made a judgment that, from our perspective, we need to lift our vaccination rates much higher than where they are now before we want to move into that area. But, eventually, I think we'll find that we'll be in quite a similar position.

**Media:** Does them changing how they're accepting international travellers change our perception of the trans-Tasman bubble?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Not particularly at this stage. But, as we know, we review the trans-Tasman bubble once every eight weeks. We'll follow through on that review process. But it doesn't change it.

**Media:** And does Australia reopening its border show that we are falling behind the rest of the world with our slow COVID-19 response?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Absolutely not. What it shows is that we are continuing to adopt an approach that has meant that we have had one of the lowest mortality rates in the world, one of the lowest hospitalisation rates in the world, and, at the same time, had an economy that has recovered very, very well. We're doing the right thing here for New Zealand. In the first quarter of next year, we have a very clear plan to be able to reconnect New Zealanders with the world. We think that's the right thing to do.

**Media:** In Northland, many businesses are still cut off from the rest of the country because of the Auckland borders. Would you consider a travel corridor or loosening restrictions to make that easier for Northland to reconnect, especially if the border is going to be in place for a while?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Obviously, we'll always continue to review the situation, but the decisions that were made there were made on public health grounds. They were made to make sure that we limited travel through Auckland. While we want to facilitate it where we can, we also are very aware of increased volumes leading to potential risks. And so I do understand, for people in Northland, their concerns about the fact that not everybody can move as quickly and as freely as they would like. We have to strike a balance here.

Obviously, there is now an air service that can take people over the top of Auckland and bring them to Wellington. That opens up some possibilities for people, particularly for tourism reasons, to move.

**Media:** Could that change, though, if, for example, it went down to level 2 with those orders, and will those rules be reviewed as well?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** We always review the rules around the boundary each time we have a look at the overall alert level settings. So I'm sure we will continue to look at that situation.

**Media:** And also what can you say, if anything, about reports that one strand of investigation in COVID is Auckland's homeless have been a vector for COVID for some time, maybe even back to the beginning of the outbreak? Is that an angle that's being actively looked into?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, as, I think, we've discussed a number of times when we've been on the podium here, and it was just referenced in the question that Derek just

asked, there are a number of cases within this particular outbreak from people who don't have stable housing situations. I think it's important not to misuse the word "transitional" housing because that's got a very specific meaning in terms of the work that the Government does. It's a wider group of people whose housing situation is not necessarily stable. There are cases within this, and that's why we've got a specific programme working through with the Government agencies involved, but also the social sector agencies, who support people who are in that situation. So that has been part of what we've been doing throughout the outbreak, but it's one part of it; I wouldn't say it's the whole outbreak.

**Media:** And what are you looking at come Monday? You've mentioned testing, you've mentioned vaccination, how are those trends looking for Monday and what specifically are Cabinet Ministers going to be looking at?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, the first thing is the public health advice that Dr McElroy and her team provide. As has been said several times, with Delta, case numbers, per se, are only one factor; what's really important is the connection of those cases to one another. The advice we continue to get is we do not have widespread community transmission; we have clusters of cases. So we want to understand whether or not the cases that are coming through are for the vast bulk confined to those clusters where we have the outbreak under control, which remains the advice that we get. And then we'll look at a much more granular level of detail around the kinds of cases, where they might be emerging from—the mystery cases—and what that tells us about what that means for the alert level settings. We also will be looking, as I said earlier, at the testing rates, because that is an indication to us that we genuinely are finding all the cases that are out there. And so that will be an important factor.

**Media:** Will they need to be higher from where they are at the moment to give you that confidence? Is that—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Look, 19,000's a good number, and 11,000 of those in Auckland is a good number. I'd like to see those kinds of numbers over the weekend. In the past, we've seen testing rates drop off a bit in the weekends. We really need Aucklanders to do the tremendous job they've been doing over the last few days of getting out and being tested.

**Media:** Minister, just off the back of Jane's question there. In terms of any look at level 2, how low do those unlinked cases need to be in order for Auckland to move?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, we'll assess that on the day. We've always said that the elimination approach—the approach that we've been taking is a zero tolerance but not a zero case. You can apply some of that same logic to mystery cases but not all the way, because mystery cases, by their essence, provide us with concern. So we want to see that number get as low as we possibly can.

I think, overall, the other point to make is: everybody will have seen that over the full course of this, going back right to March last year, we have been cautious, we have been careful, we have been methodical in our decisions. And so we listen to the advice. We update that advice as close as possible to the time, and that would include looking at any mystery cases.

**Media:** Is that the sticking point, though, the actual unlinked cases as opposed to, I guess, total cases in the community? That's the area where—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I don't know about the sticking point, but it is the issue that we're now focused on. As I said in my earlier comments, with Delta, the total number of cases is what it is at the moment, and it's consistent in the last couple of days. What we want to know, though, is: are there people who aren't household contacts? Are there people who we weren't expecting to come through as close contacts? And then drill down into anyone who fits into that category to see what we can understand about the risk that they face.

**Media:** And just my last question. The port workers—that deadline ended yesterday. Have you got any numbers in terms of how many were outstanding to be vaccinated? Have people been pulled off the job—that sort of thing?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I'll come back to you with the specific number. A couple of days beforehand, I was given a number that was in the 95-plus percent area, which is a great result, given where we were coming from. I'll get you the final percentage number.

In terms, then, of what happens to those staff, that's an issue I don't have an update on today, but clearly we've made the rules here, and as we've done with our own staff, there's a process of seeking to reallocate people to other work that doesn't require them to be at the border, and then there are consequences beyond that. But I'd need to get you further advice on that.

**Media:** Your expectation, though, surely would be that given the rule that they—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** We've made the rule, and we're very clear on what the rule is.

**Media:** Under Auckland's boundary exemptions, I've heard of secondary students who can't leave, say, if they're at boarding school out of town, but then some uni students can fly and travel to their homes at uni. Why is that?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, well when we made the changes the other day, there was a focus, I do know, around tertiary students, because there were a number of them who needed to return, particularly for things like examinations, and so on. I haven't had raised with me the question of people going to boarding schools, and I'm certainly happy to follow that up.

**Media:** And just on the MIQ lobby, when it was announced that it was indicated room releases would be fortnightly—recently, they're weekly—what's changed? Have you got more capacity on board, or—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I think it just began—I think it was merely just testing the lobby the first time to make sure that it worked, and, obviously, it's a challenging process for everybody, not least those who are running it. And so I think it's more just that having tested it, they're now more comfortable with it.

**Media:** Can people expect a weekly sort of room release?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** That will be up to MIQ and the Minister. I haven't heard a specific rolling schedule yet.

**Media:** Minister, why are people feeling more pessimistic about the economy over the last couple of weeks, particularly?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, I think the important thing to remember here is that consumer confidence, business confidence has remained resilient throughout this period, and, in fact, we've just seen recently the Westpac consumer confidence survey come out, and while it's dropped a little, it's still, you know, ahead of where it was in 2020. I think, the issue right now, in the middle of an outbreak, is that people will, obviously, be looking at the circumstances around them. But the New Zealand economy has been resilient and robust, and I'm very confident it will bounce back again.

**Media:** Do you feel like you're losing control and losing—sorry, losing control wasn't what I meant to say; that's me! Do you feel like you're losing the confidence of people when it comes to managing our way out of COVID?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I think New Zealanders can see the success that we've had with the approach that we've taken—a strong public health approach has delivered strong economic outcomes. We've got very low unemployment, we've had very strong economic growth, our debt's stayed at a manageable level. I think the economic indicators are actually very strong. What I do understand is that when we're in the middle of a specific

lockdown period in Auckland, that will affect the mood of people. That is completely understandable, but the New Zealand economy is resilient.

**Media:** On the topic of the Dubai Expo, do you think that the huge price tag is justified, when, at the moment, we can't get businesses in and our trade routes are disrupted. Do you think that big spend is justified?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, Expo is one of the biggest—effectively, international—trade shows in the world, and New Zealand's made a big commitment to be there along with other nations around the world. I actually think it's important we are there, to show that New Zealand remains open for business. We have a plan to move ourselves to reconnect with the world, and we want to make sure people know that so that when the time comes, they want to come here, be it for personal travel or for business investment. So Expo is many, many years in the making. There is always a price tag attached to it, but not being there, and New Zealand not being present at one of the major events like this in the world, I think we'd be criticised for that as well.

**Media:** Are you concerned about potential community transmission within the construction sector in Auckland?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Not particularly, no more so than any other sector. I've certainly seen reports just before I came down here from one media outlet that indicated that there might be an issue with a construction site; haven't been able to confirm that. We don't have any information to indicate that there is any great concern there. The one thing I would say is that all businesses operating under alert level 3 know that there are rules that they need to follow to be a safe business, and we would expect any industry to be following that.

**Media:** I guess, with construction sites in particular, could you have tightened the level 3 rules so that you don't have subcontractors working across various construction sites such as the massive Ryman Healthcare site in Auckland as well as the City Rail Link site in Auckland, both of them with massive amounts of people onsite?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I guess the expectation we've got remains the same, which is that if a construction site is operating, it needs to operate safely; it needs to consider the flow of people coming in and out of the site, and to ensure physical distancing requirements remain. So there is very clear guidance in place there, on that, and it is up to each construction site to do that. If there are concerns or issues, they can be followed up by WorkSafe.

**Media:** Sorry, just about the GPs coming on board. GPs have long been critical about being excluded from the vaccine roll-out. Why has it taken until October to get them meaningfully involved like this?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, I think they've been involved—

**Dr Caroline McElroy:** I think they have—yes.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** --meaningfully well before now. I know the point you're making that in the early days, as vaccine supply ramped up, we began to bring pharmacies and GPs on more. The initial focus was around the community vaccination programmes we were running at a larger scale, but we're seeing more and more GPs and pharmacies involved. I think Dr McElroy was referring to a specific event.

**Dr Caroline McElroy:** That's right. It's a very specific initiative—but completely supporting what the Deputy Prime Minister says, that GPs have been involved, and this is a very specific initiative to just help get those vaccination rates up.

**Media:** We always hear that that population was going to be difficult to target, so why wasn't this initiative brought on board sooner?

**Dr Caroline McElroy:** I think there's a number of initiatives that have been put in place the whole way throughout, and so this is an initiative that now that we have got high



vaccination rates, we can particularly target particular—we can use our GPs and the contacts that they have in order to just help us get those rates even higher.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** There's an enormous number of programmes supporting Māori and Pacific communities to be vaccinated, and, I think, this is just an example of working a specific programme through with GPs to add to that.

**Media:** I just wanted to follow on from that. So the question I asked earlier about the targeted surveillance testing at those transitional and emergency housing sites—those 40 sites—that's meant to be, basically, in addition to building up level 3 and traditional contact tracing to try and stamp out the last bits of the outbreak, but those numbers are still kind of stubbornly high, and if there are no cases that are arising from that surveillance testing, has that showed that there's still sort of household to household transmission which shouldn't really be happening at level 3?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Well, we're certainly—we are seeing other secondary cases when there's a case in those households, and that's what does up the numbers at times. But what we do have is a broad-based surveillance plan across Auckland in order to target our testing in areas, to make sure both that we've got a good representative sample of Auckland but also targeting in particular areas of concern or suburbs of concern, or where there's been cases. That plan is iterative. It changes, and you'll see that from us announcing new suburbs and new places, and we constantly evaluate that plan to see what the results are. And you know, if we've done a lot of testing and we're getting nothing—no cases; that's great, that's fantastic—but where do we need to focus our efforts? Because we want to find as many cases as we can.

**Media:** The reason I'm asking is with all of that surveillance testing, how many cases have come from that surveillance plan in the last fortnight, and if it's none, does that just show that households are still not staying in their household bubbles?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I don't have the number. And I don't think either of us have the specific number.

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** No, and I don't.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** But, I think—

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** But we have—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** But I'm going to answer your question, Derek. We've stood on this podium before—I stood here last Friday—and acknowledged that there is, from time to time, transmission that is a result of household bubbles mixing. That is the reality of the situation. As I said last Friday, I wouldn't say that that's driven by an egregious, you know, hosting of parties – type approach; it might just be larger family groups interacting on a very minimal basis—perhaps the delivery of a food parcel or something like that. Clearly, we don't want that; clearly, we want people to stick to their bubbles. But, from time to time, we will get examples of that kind of thing leading to transmission.

**Media:** You would expect that contact tracing tends to be able to stay ahead of that, though, even in a Delta environment—so this tail is still stubbornly going on. Just trying to get a sense of if we have a gauge on why that remains so, if the surveillance testing that's happening isn't finding any new cases.

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Well, we are finding a small number of cases through that surveillance testing, but that's where we have to keep targeting more and more. As we get an unlinked case, what does that tell us? We may not be able to link it to existing cases, but we'll have some information from that case, and that allows us to then go on a hunt for where we might see some other cases. It's that constant daily tweaking of our testing plan that allows us to get to a stage where we will have a very small number of cases being picked up through that broader testing.

**Media:** Can you just say where those few cases have come from? You say there have been some few cases from surveillance. Can you just say where they've come from?

**Dr Caroline McElroy:** We can get those details for you. I am aware that some of our suburbs testing—we've been able to pick up some very small number of new cases as a result of that. So these are individuals who weren't aware that they were a case, and we need to keep doing that to find our cases, because it's when we find cases that we're then able to put in place the containment and identify who are their contacts and get ahead, as you say—get ahead of those contacts before they become cases.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I think it was, again, last Friday we mentioned the Clover Park testing that had found somebody in those exact circumstances.

**Media:** What engagement has the Government had with the likes of Gloriavale and Destiny Church to get people vaccinated?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I'm not sure specifically about Gloriavale. I do know, obviously, that there's been some conversations in recent days with the Destiny Church about an event that they have planned, which we would like them not to hold, and I know that there've been conversations there. But I don't have details specifically around vaccination-related matters.

**Media:** Is the Government doing enough, then, to target specific groups, including churches, beyond these 1 o'clock briefings?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Look, there's an enormous amount of work going on to target groups who we want to be vaccinated. Churches have been a focus throughout the programme. We've had vaccination clinics at churches. We continue to liaise regularly with them. I know, in particular, one of our Ministers—Aupito William Sio—has made that one of his key focus areas: to talk to religious leaders and to support them to get their congregations vaccinated. So there's an enormous amount of work on there. There are obviously some organisations, such as the two that you've named, who perhaps sit a little bit outside some of the mainstream churches, but we will continue to reach out to every New Zealander to get vaccinated. Zane?

**Media:** Aaron, not Zane.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Aaron. God. I will claim it was deliberate! Hello, Aaron.

**Media:** You are losing control!

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I am losing control, that's right. We'll have to finish very soon!

**Media:** Just on the COVID-positive case that self-discharged yesterday from Middlemore, where did they go to? Did they immediately self-isolate, and do they have any close contacts at home, any locations of interest?

**Dr Caroline McElroy:** I don't have the details of that particular situation, but, as the Deputy Prime Minister has said, we've been advised that they went home and then they got the test result, and Auckland public health have been in touch with them to identify their contacts and manage that. But my understanding is that they did go home.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** As far as I'm aware, Aaron, they went straight home. They are being asked about any other contacts, but they've complied completely once they got their test result, and are now going to a quarantine facility.

**Media:** And are you aware of any either transitional housing links or gang links to the case?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No.

**Dr Caroline McElroy:** I don't have any details.

**Media:** Dr McElroy, Auckland City Hospital has revealed its COVID plan today. Are you confident that hospitals are prepared for life with COVID?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** All of our hospitals have been working to make sure that they are prepared for managing COVID cases, and there has been specific focus in Auckland. They have been doing that for some months. I would expect them to be constantly refreshing their plans and making sure that they are able to respond as and when needed.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** And it is important that the district health boards do scenario planning. That's what we would expect of them in any situation—actually, frankly, with any disease outbreak, but most especially with COVID. It's an indication that they're planning for any eventuality, not a specific eventuality.

**Media:** And the Minister of Health has asked for a specific strategy from the Ministry of Health. What does that cover, and when will you be giving it to the Minister?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** On?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Which—

**Media:** On hospitals being prepared for life with COVID when we re-open.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Oh, I see. There's a wider piece of work, which is an ongoing piece of work, on health system preparedness, and the Ministry of Health is working closely with the Minister on that.

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** That's right, that's right. And that—

**Media:** And when will you be delivering that advice to him?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Preliminary advice has already been provided. It's a work in progress, so it will be constantly updated, and the Minister will be given constant updates. It is very much a continuation of work. Yes, there's a specific piece we're working on at the moment. It's an iterative thing, but it's not like it's the only piece of work being done on it; it's just a continuation

**Media:** Just a question on behalf of sport—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Thank goodness!

**Media:** —about the Women's Big Bash League. Some of the top White Ferns are having to pull out because they don't have MIQ spots. Is the Government considering a trial for returning sportspeople to self-isolate similar to that business trial you're running?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I think Minister Hipkins covered this during the week—and not immediately, no, but as we move into next year we are looking to see more self-isolation become more a part of what we do once we see how the pilot goes. The question around individual sportspeople and their ability to get managed isolation slots is something that the Minister of sport has taken a significant interest in. But we do have to balance that against the many, many other people who want to come in through managed isolation, and we equally get criticised if we prioritise sportspeople against New Zealanders wanting to return home. So we have to strike a balance here. We have tried over the course of the last 18 months to support sportspeople to come and go but it is a time of really high demand at the moment.

**Media:** Why couldn't sportspeople not have been part of that 150-person trial? Why did you not open up sport as a criteria—I guess, a business criteria—for that trial?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, I mean we talked about how to make the best use of that 150, how to quickly stand it up, how to make sure that we have a way of monitoring it and understanding the dynamics of it. A little bit hard with individual sportspeople and how they work, but, as I say, as the Minister of sport, I continue to take an interest in doing what I can to support people to be able to come and go, but we are at a period of very, very high demand and I would be answering questions about why we were prioritising sportspeople over returning New Zealanders if it was the other way around.

**Media:** Well, do you, as the Minister for sport, have a message for Suzie Bates, who's just had to pull out of the Women's Big Bash League?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, and I'm hugely sympathetic to Suzie and to other sportspeople who are in those circumstances. I'd also note that Suzie is currently coming back into MIQ off the back of a White Ferns tour where we were able to support a team of sportspeople. So we just have to make these decisions all the time. It's a really tough balance.

**Media:** Minister, just a question on EQC and on the Government's decision to increase that cap to \$300,000. Just wondering if you could give us a sense, put any numbers to how much more this exposes the Crown's balance sheet to a different type of disaster?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I didn't bring down the details of the EQC announcement today. What I would say is: lifting the cap to \$300,000 is reflective of much more of the state of the housing market today than the original cap, I think, was set at \$100,000 many, many years ago and then lifted to 150 more recently, so it's never attempting to deal with full cost, but it is an attempt to have a better reflection of the value of housing today. I'm happy to get back to you with any specific details on that.

**Media:** Just on housing, do you agree with Minister Parker that you would like to see levels of homeownership up at 1990 rates and housing affordability rates at that rate as well?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I, as you know, Jenna, because we've discussed it many times before, want to see as many people as possible owning their own home, and I want to make sure that that is as affordable as we can support to make it through our Government policy initiatives.

**Media:** Obviously, you're going into a recess, but depending on what happens with levels and especially that boundary level change which the Prime Minister has indicated may be there for some time, what is your thinking, I guess, around Parliament and how it might operate in the next sitting block? Obviously, the Speaker has a lot of control over this but does there come a point where, I guess, MPs who have been stuck in Auckland—they're earning full pay, they're not contributing as much as they could be if they were in Parliament. At what point do those Auckland MPs just come back and be part of proceedings?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I am just going to push back a little bit on the premise that's inside that question. I've been doing a lot of work with my colleagues in Auckland over the last few weeks—

**Media:** I said "not as involved".

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, well, no, we'll go back and look at the transcript of that. They're working hard up there and they're still able to perform a significant part of their roles as MPs. What they can't do is participate in the debating chamber. Select committees, they're continuing to participate in because they're still operating online, but they can't be there in the debating chamber, and I'm sure for many of them that's something that they would like to be able to participate in. MPs are essential workers, so there is an ability for MPs to travel but, obviously, their participation here at Parliament then has to balance with the Speaker and his views around how Parliament should operate. I imagine this will be a matter that the Business Committee will discuss.

**Media:** Can we please get an update on what the Samoan vaccination rate is at today? And, Minister, South Seas Healthcare is running a telethon to get people vaccinated, and including food parcels for everyone that does come through. What do you make of that initiative?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Awesome. Fantastic. If it gets people vaccinated, that is a great thing for them to do. We've been supporting South Seas through this period to help them deliver the vaccinations. They do a great job, and if that's the decision that they've made around how they think it will support people to get vaccinated, then all power to them.

On the vaccination rate, I don't have that with me, but I'm sure we can get that to you just as soon as possible.

**Media:** I just wanted to ask about those suburbs of concern—I think there are eight or nine of them. Can you say if any of those have not had any new cases in the last week or fortnight?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** I'd have to get back to you with the details on that.

**Media:** And do you know if there's still any door-to-door testing going on outside of the transitional housing area?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I believe there certainly has been and, I think, as far as I'm aware, it's still going.

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Yes, I think that's right. And that's also where the—some of the suburbs that drop off is because there hasn't been anything in those suburbs, and so it's moving the testing to other suburbs. But, as far as I'm aware, there's still door-to-door testing happening in some of those suburbs.

**Media:** Do you know what take-up is like, because at Clover Park it was, like, nine out of 100 households who were saying yes?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** No, I don't, but we can come back to you.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I think the door-to-door focus has been very much street by street. So it is looking at quite a granular level. I don't have the numbers on it, but underpinning, I think, a bit of your questioning, Derek, is "What is the status of surveillance testing?" It is very much part of what we're doing here. We're not simply sitting back and asking people just to show up; we are actively working with community groups, with the district health board, and Regional Public Health to get out and do testing. It's very much part of the mix of what we're doing.

**Media:** Are you still pursuing a zero COVID strategy?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** We're still pursuing the Government's strategy, which is to stamp out COVID—

**Media:** But—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** —I'll finish—to stamp out COVID. That has never meant zero cases—ever, in the whole time. That would be eradication. The Government has been pursuing the strategy of stamping out COVID and eliminating COVID, and we continue to have the greatest focus that it is possible to have on limiting this outbreak. Obviously, as the Prime Minister signalled two or three times from the podium, we've looked to the alert level framework, and thinking about what does vaccination mean for that, but our job here is to get this outbreak under control. We believe we're doing that. It doesn't mean zero cases, but it means zero tolerance for cases.

**Media:** So do New Zealanders sort of need to adjust their mind-sets to having sort of cases cropping up even in lower alert levels?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, as I say, we've always—even if you look at the alert level framework as it's written today, alert level 2 envisioned the idea that there might be cases. So we've always had that in our mind. What we are saying is we now move to a different place because of vaccination, and that's what the Prime Minister has spoken about, and I'm very confident she'll have more to say about that over the coming days and weeks. Thanks, everybody, and I'll go upstairs to print out name tags for all of you!

**conclusion of press conference**