

**ALL OF GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCE: THURSDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. Look, before we start today, I'm going to hand over to the Director-General of Health for an update on the Delta outbreak in Auckland.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Thank you, Prime Minister. Kia ora koutou katoa. So today there are 19 new cases in the community to report. Eighteen of those are in Auckland and one is in northern Hauraki, a student at Mangatangi School who is already in isolation. Today's cases take our total number of cases in the outbreak to 1,249. There are also six cases in managed isolation to report today.

Now, of today's cases, 16 are known household or other contacts, one is a household contact who had not previously been identified, and one is a possible contact. Looking back to yesterday's large number of cases, just four remain unlinked at this point, with investigations ongoing.

So Delta's high infectiousness is played out within in households, and that underpins some of the numbers we've been reporting over recent days. We know from a number of the already notified contacts in our system, we're expecting another 30 or so cases over coming days from day five and day 12 testing. Just regarding where our current cases are coming from, 19 of our recent cases are linked to transitional or emergency housing. This is some but by no means all of our new cases.

Now, just going back to Mangatangi School, as I mentioned earlier, one of those is a student from the school in upper Hauraki who's been isolating at home for the last 10 days. The positive result was returned because the student became symptomatic and was tested around day 11. A small number of household contacts of the student are being followed up by the public health staff today. The student is one of 98 who have now received day 12 tests; both students and staff. Ninety-six negative results have been returned, this one positive result, and the final outstanding test is expected to be done today. The student initially tested negative, but was retested, as I say, when they did develop symptoms in the last few days. As this case has been in isolation at home, the risk of spread is currently regarded as low. The student is transferring to a quarantine facility in Auckland with a family member.

Now while not included in the case numbers today, there is a positive result in a managed isolation worker at Naumi Hotel in Auckland. This case is still being investigated to determine if it's border related or part of the existing community outbreak, and urgent whole genome sequencing is being done to help shed light on this. The worker is, of course, fully vaccinated, and was last tested on 14 September, and this positive result was picked up again through regular fortnightly testing. Public health staff are just making inquiries today to check if any other staff or returnees require additional testing or other action.

And on the subject of testing, you'll be aware there is both targeted and wider surveillance testing under way in Auckland. There were over 11,000 tests taken across Auckland yesterday, and thank you to everybody who was tested. Our suburbs of interest have been updated: Ōtara is no longer one of those suburbs of interest; and Henderson and Papakura now are. So we want people in the suburbs of interest—the other ones that are still there are Clover Park, Māngere, Favona, Manurewa, and Mount Wellington / Sylvia Park. If you are in those suburbs, please come forward and get tested whether or not you have symptoms. This is to ensure that we find both symptomatic cases but also undertake surveillance testing to check if there are any unidentified chains of transmission. The testing teams in Auckland are also going out to around 40 transitional and emergency housing sites over coming days to offer testing to all those residents there. Most important, though, for people anywhere they are, across the motu, is if you have any flu or cold symptoms, no matter how mild, go and get a test.

On to Tauranga, as has been reported already today, just confirming that follow up 24 hour collections of waste water in both Mount Maunganui and Tauranga have come back negative. There will be further follow-up testing in coming days just to provide further reassurance there.

Back to the subject of long COVID. We're learning more and more about the long-term effects of COVID-19 infection; what is now referred to as long COVID. To be clear, long COVID is real. A new study by the University of Oxford and the UK National Institute for Health Research found more than one in three people with COVID-19 will experience at least one symptom of long COVID. This study included more than 270,000 people recovering there. They found 37 percent of patients had at least one long COVID symptom, diagnosed three to six months after infection. The most common symptoms were breathing problems, abdominal symptoms, fatigue, pain, and anxiety or depression. Now, although people who get flu or other viral illnesses can also have prolonged post-viral symptoms, this study found the symptoms linked to COVID were 50 percent more common in those who had COVID compared to people who had had flu.

And finally, I would like to acknowledge a free, new taxi service, which begins in Auckland today to help get more people vaccinated there. Auckland's co-op Blue Bubble Taxis will transfer people who have previously been unable to get to vaccination centres for free. This service is those having their first doses only, who are either unable to drive or can't access other forms of transport. It's open to whānau bubbles of all sizes as shuttles, as well as taxis, are also available. A great initiative. Back to you, Prime Minister.

PM: Thank you, Dr Bloomfield. As you can see, there has been some volatility in cases in recent days. At this stage though, we continue to have full control of the COVID outbreak in Auckland, and control is key. We simply do not have enough people vaccinated in Auckland or in New Zealand to tolerate a widespread outbreak. But maintaining that control is not a given, and the public health team in Auckland need our help. Firstly, while we put on the individual armour of the vaccine we still need the restrictions that we're using. I know they're hard. I know they're incredibly hard. They will ease, but for now they're doing a job for us, that's why we need people to keep following them. And this is also an important time to remind people that this is not an outbreak that is in one part of Tāmaki-makau-rau. In fact, we have a cluster, at present, in West Auckland. That's why we need everyone on high alert. But with a particular focus on some of the new additional suburbs we've talked about today, Henderson and Papakura. We're asking people with even mild symptoms to be tested in those areas, but again, across all of New Zealand, if you have symptoms please be tested. But particularly Henderson and Papakura we're adding to our list.

The second ask again, as always, is vaccines. Since the outbreak began Aucklanders have turned out in force to get vaccinated, and they've done a brilliant job but there is still some way to go. We need everyone to be double vaccinated. We know it can and will make a difference. Even for this outbreak, only three percent of our cases in this outbreak were fully vaccinated. Obviously, the vast majority were not. Vaccines matter. They keep us safe. They're helping us to control this outbreak, and they will literally give you choices in the future. Eighty-three percent of eligible Aucklanders have turned out to get their first dose, and across the rest of the country, 80 percent of those who are over the age of 12 have either had their first dose or are booked for their first dose, which is fantastic.

But we have seen that achieving 90 percent is possible. Groups within New Zealand are already showing us this. Nationally, 92 percent of our over 65s have had their first COVID vaccine, and nearly 90 percent have either had or are booked in to have their second. It is possible to hit 90, and we need everyone to put that effort in. That's why it's great to see regions across New Zealand are entering into a bit of competitive spirit, with Canterbury businesses launching a "90 percent—we're worth it" campaign, and the top of the South attributing their high vaccination rates to freezing work visits and stadium clinics. Local chambers, councils, and businesses are showing incredible leadership to drive up our vaccination numbers. They know, as I know, that we can be world leading in getting our population vaccinated.

And while vaccinations have been available at more than 1,400 different places to date, sometimes it is a matter of getting there that gets in the way. That's why I do want to, again, reiterate the new service that Dr Bloomfield has just mentioned: a free taxi and shuttle service to get people to community vaccination centres. As Dr Bloomfield said, it's available from tomorrow for families of all sizes who can't drive or don't have transport to be vaccinated. If you are someone who needs this service, you can contact 0800 28 29 26—that's 0800 28 29 26, that's the vaccine helpline.

Also, today is the second day of a drive thru vaccination centre for Tuvalu, Kiribati, and Tokelau communities in Te Atatū at 40 Kirrie Avenue, and it's running until 4.30 p.m. today. On Friday and Saturday there is a pop-up drive thru at Henderson High School and another for the Samoan community at the Vodafone Events Centre. There is also a testing and vaccination two-day session, beginning at Bunnings and Mitre 10 in Manakau today. So if you're popping down for some click and collect, you can also be both tested and vaccinated at the same place.

If it's time that is stopping you from getting a vaccine—please, can I ask again, employers, to give your employees the gift of time and encourage them to get their jab. You know, as I do, that people are always our greatest asset. And is there any greater way to show your employees that you care than by keeping them well? Please, do it today. It is, of course, our ticket to greater freedom and greater control.

Before I hand over to questions, I want to acknowledge the significant policy announcement that was made today on the pathway to residency. We've talked a lot about the team of 5 million; some of that team have been here for the entire time of COVID, but on visas that haven't given them certainty for the long term. Some may have been here more recently but have skills that are scarce and that we need to hold onto. So for those who are settled, skilled, and scarce, we are offering a pathway to residency that acknowledges the one-off situation we are in with this pandemic.

This represents the most significant announcement in immigration policy in recent memory. It is one that we have been working hard on behind the scenes for many months, but one we're also very proud of. I know this will be a welcome move for communities, for employers, and for the team of 5 million as a whole. Minister Kris Faafoi will answer questions on this announcement at the conclusion of this stand up—so, roughly, half past one.

We're now happy to take your questions.

Media: Can I ask [*Inaudible*] vaccine question—

PM: Sorry?

Media: —a triple-pronged vaccine question. Will those cabbies have to be vaccinated? Will you vaccinate—if you're going around those 40 transitional housing places—will you also encourage vaccination there as well as testing? And, of the total case numbers, are you also encouraging those people—given the majority are unvaccinated—are you encouraging them to get vaccinated and providing—

PM: Yep—I can pick up the last two. On the arrangements around the taxi service, I don't have that detail. So I'll leave that one to Dr Bloomfield. On the transitional housing, the initial focus of the team is to go through and immediately test, and they want to do that really quickly and efficiently. So that's the initial focus. They're already making plans to then return with a vaccine programme for those who have not already been vaccinated—so that is part of the planning.

More broadly, we're taking that approach generally with communities that we're having contact with because they've been identified as COVID cases or COVID contacts. So conversations are happening almost immediately about the future, if they are a positive case, around making sure, when the time is right, to vaccinate family and friends as well. And I'm told that many of those conversations are incredibly positive, because people fully understand the impact of COVID.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Thanks, Prime Minister. Just on the testing/vaccination: the team in Auckland is moving to roll out more combined testing/vaccination opportunities, and there's one today outside the Manakau Bunnings—which I think there's a Mitre 10, and it's quite a big carpark so you can go and get your vaccination and a free test thrown in as well. So same bus; different sides of the bus.

PM: Is there a sausage?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Bound to be. You can judge whether the Mitre 10 or the Bunnings sausages are better.

On the question about the cabbies: they're not required to be vaccinated, but I would be very surprised if the cabbies in Auckland—not just in the Blue Bubble but other cabbies—haven't been vaccinated.

Media: Just a quick level question: if Auckland does move to level 2 on Monday, would you consider keeping the boundary in place—so people can't leave the city but they can have a bit more freedom within?

PM: What I would like to signal now is the high likelihood of that boundary remaining. And I think I owe that level of certainty to Aucklanders. With the outbreak as it stands, yes, we are giving full consideration to easing, but there's a number of ways that we can consider that, and those are all the conversations that we are having now, based on the data and information that we have. But what is not in consideration presently is the idea of removing that regional boundary at this time. And so I'm very happy to give that clarity. I know that will be hard to hear, but it is not one of the things we're currently considering.

Media: How big a taxi fleet are you offering, and is this a Government-funded initiative?

PM: To Dr Bloomfield.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I'll have to come back to you, I'm not sure how big the Blue Bubble taxi fleet is in Auckland but I think it's one of the largest. And, as for the funding, we'll come back to you on that.

PM: Obviously, we're funding it as part of our vaccination programme because it's a free service.

Media: And you're intending it to run for quite a while?

PM: I haven't got the length of time that we're running it for, but we do know that we're doing this at the same time that we're going into people's homes where they have accessibility issues. So that's worked for our disabled community, we already have a programme that allows us to safely vaccinate in-home. That's, as you can imagine, a reasonably confined number of people, but we know that there are those that just have transport issues, so this is about that middle group, it's not necessarily that they have a disability that prohibits them, but they have a transport issue that prohibits them.

Media: Are either of you able to give us a bit of a broader picture about where we are with the outbreak at the moment? Are we still looking at—I think you said before, Dr Bloomfield—three active sub-clusters, and are we now looking at eight or nine suburbs of concern, with the addition Henderson and Papakura? We've also been asked about potential cases in the North Shore—in Takapuna and Albany—in the past week and a half, and whether there are concerns about those cases, maybe they're linked and they're not of concern.

PM: Yeah.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: OK. I think that's three questions, that's about all I can deal with at once. The middle one is the easiest one; there are seven suburbs of interest now. So Ōtara comes off the list; Henderson and Papakura are added.

On the question of the outbreak and how it's evolving, I asked this of the team this morning. So, I think, two days ago, I described four clusters of interest that were active. There are now two new sub-clusters, one of which they're calling a south-east Auckland cluster—household

cluster, there are five households in that one—and then there's one that they've just identified and talked about today, the team, which is a West Auckland cluster. And it's those two sub-clusters that are really giving rise to the active—the new cases—at the moment. So of the other ones that were active, only one of those—sorry, none of those have actually had new cases in the last few days. So it's really these two newly identified sub-clusters that are the ones giving rise to the acute cases.

PM: And just to give some context on those, we had this discussion around the source of those two new clusters—the south-east Auckland and West Auckland—and for one of them, there appears to be a link to an existing cluster. But it's been identified in its own right. And with the other, it seems that there's likely to be another link as well to an existing cluster. But given just what the team are managing, they've been identified separately.

Media: Are the gang members and the transitional housing places, are they part of those two sub-clusters that you've identified or are they a part of older ones?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Certainly with the south-eastern Auckland cluster, some of the households involved are transitional housing, but there are no specific gang-related households involved in either of those of two new sub-clusters.

Media: And the 37 unlinked cases in the past fortnight? Where do they fit into in the picture? Are they also in those suburbs or sub-clusters that you've identified?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I'd have to come back to you on that, but at the moment, our total number of unlinked cases, as at the end of yesterday, was, I think—

PM: Fifteen, over the past 14 days.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yep—

Media: I think the media release that's just come out has more than that.

PM: What we might do is come back and consolidate, because obviously, as you know, when we go back in the previous 24 hours, we're often able to draw those linkages and that reduces down our unlinked cases. That's the report I've had on the daily today, but we might come back to you tomorrow with that unlinked consolidated list for you.

Often, over time, and as you'll hear us referencing, whilst we've got these two new clusters, we still believe that there are linkages back into our existing outbreak, even though some of them may not have a conclusive source.

Media: There's been a positive case in Albany in a group of apartments, is that one of the unlinked cases, and if so does that mean the spread of the virus is increasing across Auckland?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I don't know exactly, because Albany didn't come up in any of the discussions, but I think that case is linked to the West Auckland grouping, but we can come back and confirm that with you.

PM: Yes. I have a theory on which one I believe you're speaking about but I don't want to be wrong, so I won't hazard my guess on it.

Media: And specific health teams reaching the most vulnerable, like those in emergency accommodation say, they want more control of the response, as the vulnerable families are often dealing with multiple people from DHBs, public health, which creates confusion and anxiety; why is there still confusion and frustration 18 months into this pandemic?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I'm actually quite surprised to hear that, because that's very much not the message we're getting. In fact, there's a very clear approach now in Auckland, not just in this outbreak but it started in August last year with the South Auckland outbreak, but certainly in this outbreak, very early on with that very large number of cases and households and Pacific churches. There was a strong handover—there was a very visible handover of the leadership, of following up with those households to our Pacific providers there. And, likewise, in the last couple of weeks, where we've had these cases and groupings

emerge in emergency and transitional housing, there's a specific incident management team has been set up, led by actually not the public health unit but by the Northern Regional Health Coordination Centre, but with a whole range of Government agencies and other providers, Māori, Pacific, and mental health and addiction providers involved.

PM: I think the easiest way—we can just literally call those providers after this press conference and just try and establish what might be going on, because it's certainly, as far as we're advised, our teams on the ground are working really closely together. We know those providers often have the closest links and relationships with family, and so we've been very proactively using them and funding them to support the response. So we'll see if we can weed out what's going on.

Media: Just on the emergency and transitional housing—it might be for you, Dr Bloomfield. Can we get just a bit more clarification, are we talking about sort of a few households? Are we talking about sort of dense—you know, lots of apartments? Like, how many sorts of places and how big is the spread, potentially? I think yesterday, in response to a question I asked, you said a 40 figure that they were going to come and identify, test, and then follow up with vaccination, but I wasn't sure whether you were referring to sort of 40 houses, facilities, people—can you just give a bit of clarification on that?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes, so there are two parts to that. First of all, the sort of transitional and emergency housing places that are involved is a mix of some sort of hostels, motels, and actual houses. But, because of the nature of the accommodation arrangements, people are often moving between, and so hence the links. The 40 figure was—of the 73 emergency housing sort of locations or places in Auckland, the team had identified 40 that they thought were medium to high risk, mostly because of where they were geographically located, not places that have got cases already. And the plan is to focus going out to all those as part of surveillance testing and any case finding, just because there is movement often between different emergency and transitional housing places.

Media: Right, so that 40—like, one could be in an entire motel you're talking about?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: That is right.

Media: So what sort of numbers of people are we talking, do you think?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I'll have to come back to you on that.

Media: But, I mean, potentially hundreds?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yeah, I have no idea. I mean, it could, if there are 40, potentially be hundreds, but we can come back to you on that.

PM: But, again, that's because we've identified a risk for surveillance as opposed to this being part of specific contact tracing.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, just in regards to the person who was in Kaitiāia on the 17th, went to Auckland, was arrested on the 23rd, later tested positive, can you confirm that the person wasn't infectious while they were in Kaitiāia, and whether or not waste water testing has been done Far North and do we know the results of that?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I can categorically confirm that they were not infectious when in Kaitiāia, and there's been a pretty forensic look at that just to make sure we're a 100 percent confident around that. I know there is waste water testing done in Kaitiāia, as in a number of places in the North, and we'd have to go back and have a look at the results to see what those showed at around that time.

Media: The person was arrested and processed at the Waitakere Police Station. Is there any connection between the closure of the Waitakere Police Station and the current sub-cluster in Henderson?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Not that I know of, no, but we can just check that.

PM: Sorry, would you tell me your Kaitiāia date again that you were interested in?

Media: The 17th.

PM: We had a negative waste water test in Kaitiāia on the 21st, for what it's worth.

Media: Prime Minister—

PM: I'll come over here, at the front, and then come back to you at Newshub, and then Ben.

Media: On long COVID, that was a bit of a stark warning: more than 1 in 3. We have a sizeable chunk in New Zealand who are already suffering from long COVID—

PM: Yes, we do.

Media: What's the plan for them? What's in place?

PM: You're absolutely right to point that out. Although we have a small, relative to other countries, number of cases of COVID in New Zealand, there are people who, particularly through that first lockdown, experienced COVID well over a year ago who continue to report symptoms. I've met and spoken to several of those individuals, and it's devastating the impact that COVID has continued to have on their lives. The research here is incredibly important: making sure that our health system knows to continue to work and support those individuals, but also just working hard to prevent too many other people from experiencing, potentially, the effects of long COVID. But, on the medical response—Dr Bloomfield.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes, two things I'd like to point to. One is we've got a clinical pathway in place now for primary care to use to help diagnose and support people with long COVID symptoms. I was reading an article about this over the weekend that actually there are three different clusters of symptoms that have been identified in the international research, and they're quite an extensive range of symptoms. So, that's one thing that's in place.

And the other is we have funded a study of people in New Zealand—and that's getting under way, people who have had COVID—to follow them to see what the long COVID symptoms are that they have and what happens prospectively in terms of symptom resolution or what else happens.

Media: Do any of those plans involve helping with doctors' bills or—

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: There's no specific funding at this point. People would be eligible for publicly funded services including for many, in terms of accessing general practice, the usual subsidies that are there that the Government provides for people to access general practice.

Media: On average there's about 4,000 first doses in Auckland at the moment, sort of give or take, usually hovering under. So on some back of the envelope maths, that would take roughly 60 days to get Auckland to 90 percent. Is that what you're planning for? Is that good enough, and how are you going to ramp that up so it's not going to take two months to get to the 90—

PM: So whilst I haven't run that exact calculation, based on what you've said, yes, we are at about 83 percent at the moment. But what we know is that, actually, we have the ability to get to 90 percent very quickly. We have all the capacity we need to achieve that goal pretty much almost immediately. So really it just comes down to all of us. You know, the one thing we know—because we keep asking questions and trying to undertake a bit of research—is for those who may not yet have had their first dose, they really want to talk to someone who was a bit reluctant as well. So if you're someone who was reluctant to get their dose but made the decision to do so, please go and talk to someone else. It will make a really big difference to helping them make that decision. We're at the hard end now. Those who took no convincing, they're done. We're now at the people who need a conversation, so please be one of those people who reaches out and has one.

Media: On the Auckland boundary, how long can we expect that to be in place?

PM: Of course, we want to get to a position where we can have movement again. Obviously, it causes a huge amount of work for managing the boundary safely, and also a huge amount of stress and anxiety for those who are separated. So, of course, we want to get that movement back, but it needs to be safe. At the moment, we do have control of the outbreak in Auckland, but we still have an outbreak. So we'll continue to assess the role of the regional boundary as we go, but at the moment it is not one of things I expect to be lifted on Monday.

Media: Could it be until Auckland gets to the 90 percent vaccination threshold?

PM: That's not something that we've made any direct connection to. But, again, what I would say is our modellers are already telling us that vaccines are making a difference to this outbreak. So to help us continue to manage this outbreak, to give you more freedoms in the future, potentially to access large gatherings in the future, please, get vaccinated.

Media: Just following on from that, what are some of the specifics that you'd be looking for to end that boundary?

PM: Look, for us, actually, the more obvious question for us is what we'll be looking for to ease restrictions. The boundary is not the first cab off the rank for decisions on Monday. There are other things that we'll be looking to that we consider lower risk for consideration.

OK. I'll take the last question from Ben and then I'll hand over to Minister Faafoi.

Media: I've got one on COVID and one on immigration, if that's OK. Over the last few days we've seen John Key and ACT and National put out their duelling plans on COVID. It sort of ended the political consensus—obviously, there's been arguments on the margins; but now—

PM: I didn't know there was one!

Media: Well, it's close enough to one and now it's obviously not there. So I guess the question is how big a problem is that for your Government? Do you think it could impact either vaccination rates or compliance rates or anything else?

PM: No, I think, at its core, the bones of what individuals are arguing for is still there. Everyone want high vaccination rates. Everyone wants to have as few restrictions as possible. And everyone wants to eventually move away from restrictions at the border. All that we're having a debate about is how you phase those things safely. My view is that phasing is key here.

Very few countries around the world have pulled away their border restrictions first. For me, that is not a safe way to manage COVID. We need to make sure we get our domestic settings right so that we can have as few restrictions for people domestically as possible before we start making those alterations at the border, and that requires good, decent vaccines.

Media: And just in broad brush strokes about immigration before the immigration Minister, I guess there's been a lot of heartache around the delay. Can you just actually explain why it takes so long to get those sort of policy wheels churning, why it's taken so long to get to this delay, and whether you will give a pledge of sorts to hasten the application so that it's not years in the making?

PM: Well, actually, the reason we took time to do this work was so that when we announced it we knew that we had designed it in such a way that we could move a large number of people through residency applications quickly. And the other reason it has taken some time for us to develop and consider is because you'll be hard pressed to find a decision in immigration policy in recent history as significant as this one. This is a large number of people who are already here in New Zealand making a huge contribution. We want to give them the ability to stay and continue to contribute, but that's not a switch that you flick lightly or quickly. We've considered it properly and well and we believe that it will make a big difference for those who will be affected by it. Thanks everyone.

Hon Kris Faafoi: Folks, I know some of you want to get to the Grand Hall and the Prime Minister has kicked this off already, so I may as well just crack into questions.

Media: Similar Ben's question to the Prime Minister, what took you so long?

Hon Kris Fafoi: Oh, look, it's not an insignificant decision. It's 165,000 people who we're going to give a one-off pathway to residence. We've had to work through those issues, the implications of those issues. When this piece of work started out, there were specific sectors that were asking for pathways to residence. Over time it emerged obviously that, you know, the resolution had to cut across all sectors. It's a big piece of policy work and, as the Prime Minister said, probably one of the biggest immigration policy decisions that will be made in our living memory, so it took time. Look, in terms of that. We acknowledge the difficulties that people have been through, but I think this morning they woke up to a pretty comprehensive resolution to some of the uncertainty that they have had and that employers have had.

Media: How many critical workers did we lose because you didn't fix this fast enough?

Hon Kris Fafoi: Oh, look, it's hard to say. If I look at the number of temporary visa holders who left in New Zealand in the last year compared with the previous year, as the borders have closed that has decreased. So while some people have left, I think if you look at the magnitude of the people that we are giving the pathway to residency, 165,000, an overwhelming majority of people now have a pathway to residence and therefore pathway to permanent residence and a pathway to citizenship now here in New Zealand. Considering where they were in the previous months, I think that is a welcome change for them and that's what we've been hearing so far this morning.

Media: How do you trust Immigration New Zealand to achieve this, given they've botched the announcements—

Hon Kris Fafoi: Look, as the Prime Minister has said, one of the things that I have been riding them hardest on is if we make a commitment like this, then people aren't waiting long periods of time. I don't want to get into boring detail, but the current process is paper-based, so they've had some disruptions to the likes of processing when they go into alert level 4. This will all be online. We are, because of the broadness of the criteria—some of those checks now will be relatively simple. We will keep the rigour in the checks. There'll be health checks and New Zealand Police checks done, as people would expect to be done, to make sure that those processes are as stringent as they usually should be.

Media: But you've said that the majority will be processed within a year. So that means some will be processed outside of a year, and what will the average time be? Because that's not a considerably fast track.

Hon Kris Fafoi: So it's coming—there are two tranches. I think there are about—just a little over 20,000 people who have an expression of interest or an application in there first. They will be prioritised first: those with an EOI with dependant children 17 years and over. Obviously, we want to make sure they're dealt with so they can become domestic students if that's possible. Then it will depend on the window that opens on 1 March next year and people coming through. So I guess the message will be people getting organised to make sure they've got everything they need to get done to get that process through. But, again, we've streamlined the process—the process is online. Because these applications are going in, we're expecting the demand for the likes of other visa extensions to decrease, and, as we can, resources will be prioritised to this processing of these resident visas.

Media: Minister, 165,000—does that mean that in future years you won't be able to issue as many residencies. In the past, there's been a guideline around 90,000 to 100,000 every two years. So what does this mean for the next few years?

Hon Kris Fafoi: Two things. If we're talking about residency applications for the next three or four years—and given the situation with the border—we'd expect the residency application numbers to tail off for a bit again. In the wider policy sense, we kind of outlined what we want to do with rebalance work. We're also doing a review of the settings around the skilled migrant category in terms of points and other settings there as well. This gives us a lot of breathing space to be able to do that work—to have conversations with a whole lot of

sectors that have relied on those residency pathways in the past—to have those discussions about what we'd like to do with a rebalance and also what that might look like in terms of what residence looks like after we complete that review.

Media: Minister, just a follow up question from my colleague. So you are confident that Immigration New Zealand will be able to process the majority of those resident visas within a year of the category opening?

Hon Kris Fafoi: I have asked them ad nauseam, and we've changed processes. I think the fact that the process is moving from paper based to online will make a big difference because we will be able to move work around the country now, instead of it being predominantly based in Auckland, where we have had some disruptions. One of the other things that happens when you have paper-based applications is if someone has failed to fill in or give the correct details then the paper work goes back and has to be restarted again, so you go back to stage one. The online process will make sure that people have sent all the relevant information. Also, because the broad eligibility for the one-off resident visa means that if you meet one of the criteria and you've got one of the eligible visas and you're in the country in the right time, as soon as you tick one box and you have your character and health check come through, you are eligible to have that application accepted and you'll get your visa. So while we'll keep the rigour in the system, it is going to be much more streamlined.

Media: Does this mean hiring more officers, and, if so, how many?

Hon Kris Fafoi: It doesn't necessarily mean that. Again, it's going to be a balance of reprioritising some kinds of processing of visa work, which we probably won't see much more of anymore, at least while this one-off residence application process is open. Again, we'll watch that very closely in terms of making sure there's resourcing to get those applications done in a timely manner.

Media: In terms of those getting visas, the 17 years or older—the dependants. Are they likely to go another year without the ability to work or study?

Hon Kris Fafoi: No. That's why we are prioritising them. They will go into the first wave of applications, which start on 1 December. We don't want to see those dependants who are likely to be eligible to be waiting a long time to find out whether or not they're eligible to be domestic students.

Media: And will there be any new fees to apply for the new category for those already in the queue?

Hon Kris Fafoi: So we haven't landed on fees. What I can say is it's going to be roughly in the region of what you would pay for a residency application at the moment, which is about \$2,600. People who have already applied for a residency visa have already paid, and those who have got an EOI in the process have already paid an EOI fee. When they apply for a one-off residence visa, they won't be asked to pay up front. When we land at a fee for the one-off residency visa, if the fee is lower than what some people have paid, they'll get a refund. If it's higher than what people have paid, they'll be asked to top that up to what the fee is. So no one will be worse off. People may choose—if they want to, and I don't think they will—to stay in both queues, and they will have to pay for being in the current queue, or the new queue. I'm not suggesting what people should do, but I suggest they take the one-off residency pathway.

Media: How did you react, Minister, when you realised that your immigration department had accidentally posted your policy online the day before?

Hon Kris Fafoi: Oh—I think I have expressed a degree of frustration to the chief executive of MBIE. Mistakes happen.

Media: Did it shake your faith in Immigration New Zealand?

Hon Kris Fafoi: No, it didn't because a lot of people have worked extremely hard to get us to the point where we are now. I have expressed a level of frustration with the head of

Immigration New Zealand and MBIE. I'm not going to make life worse for some IT people who are across the road. I think they probably felt bad enough yesterday afternoon, and I actually feel for them because it was a mistake, it wasn't intentional. We move on, and I think the weight of the announcement today actually makes that relatively insignificant.

Media: You've repeatedly said that you acknowledge the disruption but will you apologise to those who have been caught up in the long waits for residency?

Hon Kris Fafoi: Look, we've acknowledged that it's taken some time—

Media: Have you apologised?

Hon Kris Fafoi: No, we acknowledged that it's taken some time, but it's a significant piece of policy work to make sure that we get right. As the Prime Minister said, we want to make sure we work through it carefully, and we thought about the implications and that we met the needs of people who are settled here, the needs of businesses and employers who wanted to make sure that they kept their skilled and scarce workers, and I think we've been able to get there. It's, as I say, one of the most significant immigration policy decisions for some time, and probably for some time. It has taken some time for us to carefully work through those policy considerations.

Media: Do you not think they deserve an apology?

Hon Kris Fafoi: We've acknowledged the challenges that they've been through, and we've also acknowledged that we've just opened up a one-off residency pathway for 165,000 people who are currently here. It is not a decision we make lightly. That is something that they've been concerned about for some time, and I think we've actually delivered something to them that they extremely wanted; they wanted and their employers wanted.

Media: Minister, how many immigration staff, immigration officers, who are actually involved in assessing these cases are going to be—how many staff are going to be put on making assessments of these—

Hon Kris Fafoi: Look, I don't have a figure, Luke, but this one-off residency processing will be the processing priority for Immigration New Zealand. I have spent weeks going through and understanding what the process will be, moving the process from a paper-based platform to an online platform, which has to be the way of the future. When we're working through this, the overwhelming majority of these applications, as we've been told by Immigration New Zealand, on their planning, should be able to be done within 12 months of the visa application process opening. That's a darn sight better than what people have been experiencing at the moment, and I'll be meeting regularly with Immigration New Zealand to make sure that they can keep on target.

Media: Have they given you—I mean, apart from, obviously, the overall goal, have they given you a number of how many they expect to be able to process per week, for example?

Hon Kris Fafoi: Not yet. It depends on how many come in. I expect there'll be quite a bit of interest, especially as the tranches open. I think prioritising those who are already in the queue and those EOIs with 17-year-olds in their application for the first wave, I'm hoping can be dealt with really quickly, because they've been waiting for some time. And I think those parents with those children who are heading into the likes of tertiary education will want some certainty pretty soon about their applications. Again, if they meet one of those eligibility criterias on the right visa, are in the country, and their health and police checks come through, I don't see much issue in those being done relatively quickly. But I've been given assurances that that will happen—about 80 percent—within the first 12 months. I'll be making sure that we can try and meet those goals.

Media: Do you acknowledge that we lost much-needed, critical workers because this took too long?

Hon Kris Fafoi: Look, I know some people had to make some difficult decisions about their long-term future, and we acknowledge that. But then again I put that up against the

decision that the Government has made to commit to 165 people currently in the country, who may have had little or no prospect of residency, and making sure that you can make a comprehensive and carefully considered decision was important for the Government. Again, we were—I think at the beginning of this process it was the likes of sectors coming and saying “Prioritise us.”, but I think when we looked at the issue, we stood back and actually this has to be across the board and reaching all sectors, which is what we’ve announced today.

Media: Just back on Charlie’s point—

Hon Kris Fafoi: Sorry?

Media: Just with those 17-year-olds who were really driven, and they ended up grappling with anxiety and depression because they couldn’t work, they couldn’t study, all the kids who are overseas and haven’t seen their parents for a couple of years, do you apologise to them for the suffering that they’ve endured.

Hon Kris Fafoi: Look, if you want an apology, you know, I don’t want anyone to go through difficulty, and I acknowledge that they have. What we have acknowledged is that to stop their suffering is prioritising them in the first wave of the applications, and making sure we can give them some certainty as soon as we can. If they’re likely eligible, their kids will want to be going into polytechs or universities or other tertiary education next year, and by making sure that they can have the first crack at processing is important as we head into the next tertiary year. Sorry.

Media: National have said the Government has picked up on their idea, what’s your response to that?

Hon Kris Fafoi: Well they would say that, wouldn’t they?

Media: And also, in terms of the immigration—did they? Did the Government pick up on their idea?

Hon Kris Fafoi: No. I think we’ve responded to messages that we’ve had from migrant communities, and also a lot of employers and employer advocacy groups that retaining their skills and workers is extremely important, and for having long-term certainty for migrants is important too. That’s come through, through our MPs, it’s come through our interactions with sectors and advocacy groups, and again, I think we’ve responded in an extremely comprehensive way.

It has taken some time, because it is a rather large announcement to make, and there’s a lot of work that’s gone into making sure we are confident that our settings are right and the processes can deliver what we’re asking to be done at Immigration New Zealand.

To go back to Luke’s line of questioning, I’m confident, at this stage, and I’ll be riding them hard to make they can meet the expectations that they’ve set about processing.

Media: And just in terms of the—when you say that this is one of the most significant immigration announcements; how does that fit into the immigration reset? Is this the start? Is this the bulk of it? What’s the timeline?

Hon Kris Fafoi: Look, this is a response to the situation, obviously, that we’ve had with the global pandemic and the issues that it’s caused for employers, making sure they can retain their workers, and also the uncertainty of, in terms of long-term settlement here for migrants.

We said back in April or May of this year, that we want to talk to sectors about what our long-term immigration settings are; we’ll do that by doing the review of the skilled migrant category, but also sitting down with sectors and saying what does immigration look like for future and we can also to maximise opportunities for more New Zealanders.

There are still a lot of communities that have underrepresentation in employment, and I want to make sure we’re maxing out our opportunities to give them jobs and skills and wages where traditionally we have brought people into New Zealand. Now I’m not saying that

immigration will stop. I'm just saying I think we need to do a much better job of focusing on making sure we upskill and train and get New Zealanders into well-paying jobs, as well as being able to fill skilled jobs with migrants in the future as well.

Media: Are you anticipating an increase in fraudulent applications? Because I know that that's happened a bit in the past, so how do you ensure the right level of due diligence with this new fast-track system?

Hon Kris Faafoi: Yeah, look. There will still be rigour in the system. People will have to prove that they've been here for three years. Immigration New Zealand will obviously have information about that. If people are looking to come into—looking at eligibility via the \$27 an hour; there's IRD information that will be able to sort those things out as well. So it all very much depends on the situation of the applicant as of yesterday, and there are obviously ways to check that.

I think also, important to reinforce is that the New Zealand Police checks will still be done. Immigration New Zealand still has on file offshore police checks that they've gained from people who are coming here on temporary visas. New Zealanders will want to know that the rigour within the processing is still there so that people are still meeting the standards of residency that were there before this, as well.

Media: Why not—I mean, the tales of split migrant families have garnered national sympathy. It's heart-breaking. Why aren't they included in that first tranche?

Hon Kris Faafoi: So some of them may be, Tova, if they're in the skilled migrant category already. If an applicant is there and they've got partners or dependants who are offshore, they will obviously be part of the first tranche of applications. The difficulty has always been, with those families, is the ability to—if they've got a border exception—to get the likes of managed isolation. Again, we acknowledge the difficulty that those closed border settings and our obvious demand and supply issues with managed isolation.

What I do think, for those families, will be of great comfort, is that, where they have not had a pathway to residence, they will now. Those offshore dependants and their partners will be able to be included in those applications, and when they are done and they can get a managed isolation space, if that is still a setting in place, then they'll be able to come in New Zealand and have a long-term future. OK, thanks folks.

conclusion of press conference