

**ALL OF GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCE: WEDNESDAY, 17 NOVEMBER 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. Today, I will set out our plan for the next steps in our COVID-19 response, including how the country will step into the new traffic light system ahead of Christmas; how Auckland's boundary will change; and what's coming up next for the other core components in our management of COVID-19, such as community-based care and our testing and tracing regime. We are in a new phase in our fight against COVID-19. Delta is here, and we have changed our strategy to minimise the impact of it being present in our communities. Almost no country in the world has escaped Delta, and New Zealand has been no exception, but where we can be an exception is how well we minimise the virus and protect our people from it.

In the beginning, we had the elimination strategy. That's because there were no vaccines and no medical treatment for COVID-19, and it was the best way to stop people getting sick and to save lives. Elimination and the alert levels have served New Zealand well. It delivered the lowest number of cases, hospitalisations, and deaths in the OECD; gave us sustained periods of days without restrictions; and a strong economy that sees GDP rising and unemployment falling to historic low levels.

But it was never intended as a for ever strategy, and as time has gone on, we have seen its limitations and that vaccines do offer us the ability to change our approach. Delta has required that. Since it arrived in August, our approach had to shift to slowing the spread of the virus and driving up vaccinations as the best form of protection against COVID. Eighty-two percent of New Zealanders are now fully vaccinated compared to just 23 percent three months ago, and by mid-December, it's expected to be around 90 percent. That is phenomenal, and I want to thank New Zealanders and our health workforce for those rates. It means the decisive action in August to go into lockdown was also the right thing to do. It has undeniably stopped the spread of the virus that otherwise could have moved through the country very quickly.

But that doesn't mean it hasn't been incredibly tough going. I know that people are tired from our COVID fight, particularly the people and businesses of Auckland and the Waikato. We now have the unique advantage, though, of moving into the next phase of managing COVID-19 with a highly vaccinated population, and with a plan. Our plan is a simple one: to carefully reopen while continuing to protect New Zealanders' lives and livelihoods. Today, I will step out some key components of the plan.

On 29 November, Cabinet will confirm the decision to move Auckland into the new traffic light system. As we have already signalled, we expect that move to occur soon after Cabinet meets, and that Auckland will initially move into red, the highest level in the traffic light system. At that same meeting, Cabinet will confirm that the rest of the country will move into the framework at the same time as Auckland. With safety and minimising the spread of the virus in mind, I can also confirm that Cabinet will look to move those areas with lower vaccination levels into the traffic light system at red. This will add protections and, hopefully, also support an increase in vaccinations.

As I said earlier in the week, the traffic light system is safer than the alert levels. For example, currently in a region at level 2, everyone can go into a hospitality setting, vaccinated or not, with the level 2 key restrictions of seated and separated. However, at red in the new framework, you will also have to be vaccinated, which adds an extra layer of protection.

We have worked hard to get as many people vaccinated as possible. The response from New Zealanders has been incredible. As I've said, 91 percent first dose and 82 percent fully vaccinated. We know there are still some making the decision over whether to be vaccinated, but we need to make decisions now that will protect them and others. That's a very important point I want to highlight. The new system recognises disparities in vaccination rates and the risk of the virus to vulnerable communities. The Government is working with iwi leaders and

Māori health providers to keep accelerating the Māori vaccination campaign, and we remain committed to working with and supporting those who are hesitant about getting the vaccine, and our job isn't done until everyone has that opportunity to be vaccinated. But the framework helps protect unvaccinated people in the meantime by minimising spread.

All in all, the traffic light system is just better designed for our new strategy to minimise and protect against COVID-19 and is more fit for purpose than the alert levels. It also offers greater incentives to be vaccinated and greater protections for those who are and aren't. That's why it's time to get ready to move.

Aucklanders have faced restrictions for an extended period of time to keep the rest of New Zealand safe, but the time is coming to change the way it works. That's to allow all New Zealanders to reconnect with one another over summer as safely as possible, but also because, of course, we have high rates of vaccination now in Auckland also.

Today, I can announce that from 15 December people travelling out of Auckland who have either been fully vaccinated or have a negative test 72 hours prior to departure will be able to leave Auckland and visit other parts of the country. This means you will be able to enter or leave Auckland for any reason. The requirement to be tested or vaccinated before departure will be in place for the core summer period of 15 December to 17 January.

As always, police will have the operational discretion on the enforcement of these rules. It is intended that people breaking the rules will face an infringement fine of \$1,000. A significant amount of movement happens across the country during this period, so we have added this safety net to reduce spread, but have also been pragmatic. We set, for instance, drink-driving laws with penalties, expect them to be upheld, and police undertake in those cases random spot checks on our roads to ensure that they are. We will take the same approach here.

Now, on the northern boundary and the gateway to Northland, the police will work with iwi to ensure people can move but also that the people of Northland have confidence in the checks that are in place. Checks for travellers out of Auckland airport will be done at check-in. As you know, Air New Zealand have also made a vaccine certificate or test a requirement before you fly, and these requirements begin before 15 December also.

We will also be enabling Interislander ferries to require proof of vaccination or a negative pre-departure test in order to travel between Wellington and Picton. As you can see, we have given special consideration to the South Island. The combination of the vaccine or testing requirement for Air New Zealand combined with the ability for the Interislander to operate the same regime will mean all entry points to the South Island will be well covered with checks to try and slow any potential spread to the region.

This overall represents a significant shift for New Zealanders, but we have a plan and you can build your own plan too. Get your vaccine and your vaccine pass ready and continue to follow public health guidance. Cabinet is making a number of decisions in the coming weeks that are about preparing for the shift to the traffic light framework. Earlier today, Minister Hipkins provided details on how people can access their My Vaccine Pass. The vaccine pass is your ticket to summer and is essential under the traffic light system, so you can get ready and prepare by downloading it today, and we are aware that over 60,000 people have already done so since 9 a.m. this morning.

Ministers Little, Sepuloni, and Verrall will set out how testing, contact tracing, care in the community, and social support will be provided for those who may be infected with COVID-19. With fewer people needing hospital treatment because of vaccination, it's important that the model of case identification and community care is robust to ensure everyone is well looked after and that we reduce the risk of onward spread. We'll also release detailed individual sector guidance for the new traffic light system. This has been worked through in detail over the course of many weeks in consultation with different sectors in preparation for the move to the new system.

In closing, I thank New Zealanders for their ongoing efforts to rise to the challenges of this pandemic. We adopted some of the most stringent tools to eliminate the outbreak of the virus,

and we succeeded. Our alert level system helped us to avoid the worst of COVID-19, allowing us the ability to vaccinate our people before Delta reached many. We now have an updated plan to protect ourselves over the next stage of the pandemic, starting with higher vaccination rates, My Vaccine Pass, and our new framework.

It has been a year, two years, of constant change caused by COVID-19, but we've had a plan and it's carried us through. And while this may be one of our toughest periods to date, we are well set up with our new plan to carry us through to the next stage. While I know there'll be some who will think our move's too fast, others too slow, I have no doubt that this is the best plan to keep us safe and allow us to connect once again with friends and loved ones and to ultimately transition us safely to a new way of managing COVID-19. I'm now happy to take your questions, and I'll ask Dr Bloomfield to join us just in case there are other questions that relate to health advice.

Media: Prime Minister, it's still a month before people will be able to move around, particularly Aucklanders. Why do you feel that you're able to predict that far out in advance, and why would it not be sooner?

PM: Two reasons. Our view is that we do need the entire country to be in the COVID protection framework, our new system for protecting New Zealand in this next phase of COVID-19. This gives us the time to implement that new system and for New Zealanders to become familiar with it. Also, we're already at 91 percent first doses for New Zealand. This will give additional time for people to continue to be vaccinated.

Media: If the traffic light system gives more protection than the levels system, why has it taken us until the end of November to switch over to that?

PM: As you will have heard me say, we have had a phenomenal increase in vaccination numbers over a short period of time in New Zealand. And that was what was required to make sure that our next stage of taking on COVID-19, that we were best prepared for it. This framework does offer us greater protections than the old system, but that's because of vaccines and our ability to use vaccine passes.

Media: When you move those lower vaccinated regions to red, what is the threshold for them moving out into orange? Do they have to hit 90?

PM: And, look, that will be a key consideration. Vaccination levels will really in the future be part of our consideration for when you see different regions move into different levels of the system. So for that first initial decision that we'll be making on 29 November, one of the most important factors will be vaccination levels. So please go out and get vaccinated. It will determine whether or not where you live goes into the system at red or orange and it determines the amount you'll be able to do. The other point I want to make is for those who may say that they have concerns about areas where we have lower uptake of vaccines, that red level does provide extra protections, both for the unvaccinated and the vaccinated, and that's why it's so important we prepare to move.

Media: And January 17, from then on is that the new normal? Everyone can go everywhere and it's likely we'll all be in orange and back to living life?

PM: By the end of that summer period when most people have taken a summer break, our vaccination levels will be even higher again. We will have used testing and vaccine certificates to really slow down any potential spread of COVID. But we do also need to move into a phase where we don't have hard borders in New Zealand any more. They were always temporary. But actually pushing that out into January allows us to keep driving up those vaccination levels, get the new system in place, and be the best prepared that we can be.

Media: Quickly, on those hard borders, does that include the international border, if people can move freely within New Zealand?

PM: We'll have separate announcements to make in that regard in due course.

Media: And the checks that are happening at Auckland Airport, why are they only happening at Auckland Airport if people can move all around the North Island?

PM: So obviously here this is specific to what's happening with the movement of Aucklanders. Air New Zealand has this requirement for their use of domestic travel generally. So this is me just speaking to what an Aucklander will experience, but as you know, Air New Zealand have put in a vaccination certificate or testing requirement for travel across their network.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Perhaps I can add, Prime Minister, that we worked with Air New Zealand to make sure that our vaccination certificate digital regime can interface with their booking and checking-in systems to try and make that as seamless as possible for people.

Media: Prime Minister, it's almost a month now before people can come and go freely in Auckland—well, with restrictions. To follow up on Jess's question, why? Why not sooner than that so that people, particularly people that have to take their holidays a bit earlier—why shouldn't they be able to move?

PM: The first thing I'd say is that Aucklanders, of course, will experience a change and a lowering in restrictions before we get to 15 December; so things will materially change for Aucklanders before that point. The reason, though, that we're not altering our boundary requirements then and allowing that freer movement of travel is because of course it impacts on the rest of the country as well. So by the time we get to the point where we will see Aucklanders moving—yes, albeit with either a vaccine or proof of test—is because that allows us to get those vaccine rates across the country even higher again, which is an extra layer of protection as well.

Media: So why shouldn't the same rules apply to people that have been trying to get back from Australia, for example, in the ballot system? Will that change, and will they be able to now look at these rules and say, "Look, they could apply to us."?

PM: I'll let Minister Hipkins speak to that. You'll already see, of course, that we have materially changed the managed isolation requirements, halving the time that individuals are now in managed isolation, and that is step 1 of what will be an ongoing change in requirements at our international border. I'll perhaps let Minister Hipkins speak to that.

Hon Chris Hipkins: To be very clear, we haven't made decisions about further changes at the international border at this point, and we'll work through that, but one of the things that we have to consider is cumulative risk. So, even if we are dealing with 100 to 200 cases in the community in New Zealand a day, changes that we make at the border could significantly increase the number of people travelling across the border. And even if, therefore, the positivity ratio stays about the same—so even if we're getting even 10 cases per 1,000—if we're having 5,000 or 6,000 per day coming into the country, that's another 50 or 60 cases potentially coming into the country. And so we have to make sure that we're ready for that, because cases coming across the international border aren't in our contact tracing system, whereas the local community cases already are in our contact tracing system. So we have to deal with the cumulative risk, and we can't just simply throw the floodgates open. We want to do this in a managed way that means that we can continue to control COVID in the community.

Media: Can we say, though, that there will be more people being able to get back from Australia this side of Christmas? I've had a son that's been waiting for three months in the ballot system and has missed out.

PM: Well, Barry, as the Minister has pointed out, we're moving through all of this in phases. This is a considerable change in the way that we have managed COVID-19, and we're ensuring that we step through these changes deliberately and carefully. What we have said around the international border is that the next phase for us will be removing the thing that has caused the greatest constraint, by allowing self-isolation. What we need to do is release, in the near future, the dates at which we consider that will be able to safely apply. But it will, of course, affect tens of thousands. That's why we need to be cautious.

Media: Have you modelled the Māori cases numbers in making this decision today?

PM: We have—I've not received; I've seen other commentary, but I've not received specific breakdown by ethnicity, but as I say, we did in September receive modelling that demonstrated to us that high vaccination rates combined with public health measures, combined with ongoing measures at our border, is the best way to reduce the impact of COVID-19, and that is exactly what we have designed.

Media: Considering the comorbidities that already exist, the underlying health conditions in Māori communities, wouldn't it just be 101 to ask for the effects on those vulnerable communities?

PM: Well, of course, our modelling takes into account the impact of a COVID outbreak on New Zealand, including vulnerable communities. So that is, essentially, our modelling may not be able to give a breakdown by ethnicity, but of course the modelling we do on our outbreak as it stands is telling us the impact it's having. I think the point I need to come back to, though: that is the reason to move into this new framework. We have greater protection by being in this framework than we do our current one, because our current one was not designed for the realities of vaccination and Delta. We need to use those tools, and this protection framework allows us to do that.

Media: So just a question for Dr Bloomfield: John Tamihere says that the Ministry of Health is sabotaging their ability to vaccinate more Māori. Does he have a point, and what's your response?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I don't think we're sabotaging anyone from vaccinating more Māori. In fact, we're seeing Māori rates increase by the day, which is great. We're still seeing good numbers of first vaccinations and for Māori specifically, first and second vaccinations. I think the way that we are releasing data, including to John Tamihere's organisation, is supporting those efforts, and in the briefing we did yesterday for the media, one of our people, Tamati, did, I think, a very nice explanation of the ways that that is happening on the ground, including the way those data are being used to facilitate that.

Media: Do you have a threshold for those regions with lower vaccination rates initially, for them to go into red or orange? Have you set a baseline?

PM: Yeah. Well, what we've indicated, of course, is we have all the way through been trying to drive vaccination rates up to the 90 percent mark. So you can make an assumption that if you're sitting underneath 90 that you'll be in consideration for red. We are going to be pragmatic about the decisions that we make, but that is a fair assumption to make at this point. We'll be—ultimately, though, we'll use the latest data that we have on 29 November to make those individual decisions. But, it's another reason to go out and get vaccinated, or to follow up on your second dose.

Jane.

Media: Also, vaccine certificates—we're going to have a lot of people presenting to businesses in other areas with vaccine certificates. What's the compliance going to be in terms of help with businesses who are going to have to enforce these rules, and as we've seen in some cases, with some pretty aggro customers?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, in terms of—a lot of hospitality businesses are not unfamiliar with this, so they have to do checks at the moment around age, for example, and so they have systems in place to do that. We will be extending the vaccine certificate requirement to businesses that aren't as accustomed to doing that, though—so, cafes and so on.

Media: But that's a whole different level. I mean, age checks are completely different from a mandatory vaccination for entry. And as we've seen, there are many different—

PM: Do you mean just in terms of the number?

Media: Yeah, just people—

PM: Keeping in mind, we've had a scanning requirement now much more broadly than we're applying this. So we have thought carefully about where the vaccine certificate is applied. Ticketed events, for instance—they've already thought about how to integrate their process into ticketing. We haven't applied a requirement for retail, because we've taken into account the idea of, for instance, a sole operator trying to check a vaccine certificate and serve customers being very difficult, and it's a lower-risk environment. So we have thought carefully about its application. You are using it in businesses and places where people spend longer, where they're more likely to have reservations or contact with people right upfront to enable a more seamless process. In terms of enforcement, do you want to cover that off?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, the police, of course, are available to provide support around enforcement. They've been involved in this process and the discussions around this process, so they know what's coming, and they will certainly be there. The infringement regime that I think will pass its way through Parliament this week, all things going according to plan, provides us with some additional tools there, as well.

Media: Do you have any concerns, though, about that aspect of the system, given, you know, some of the behaviour, the attitudes that we're seeing—that businesses are going to have to be dealing with it and it might be pretty confronting in some circumstances.

PM: Yeah, the first thing I'd say is, look, you know, over 91 percent of New Zealanders now have had their first dose of the COVID vaccine, so a large portion of the population—obviously part of the vaccination programme, obviously willing and inclined to go out and to get their vaccine pass. The second thing is, we're not the only country to have done this. Many, many others have already implemented such a pass and so, yes, we can look to some of their experience. We will be, and are, working up sector by sector guidance to support the implementation of this requirement, and through its implementation we will keep in touch with representative groups such as hospitality, to see if there are other things we can do to support those who are enforcing this in any way, to deal with potential issues they may face.

Ah, yeah, I'll go—we do have time. We do have time, everyone. Claire?

Media: Is it me?

PM: Yes, Claire.

Media: Oh! People who have children and want to cross the border—does the vaccinated or testing requirement apply to them?

PM: No, not for under 12s.

Media: Not for under 12s. And what about—how will you handle the pressure on the testing system, in the lead-up to Christmas especially, because there's still more than 100,000 unvaccinated adults in Auckland?

PM: Yeah. So a couple of things on testing. Of course, yes, there are—obviously this is only applying to those who are choosing to move out of Auckland over that period. Our hope, of course, is that anyone who wants to move around that border or around the region will seek to be vaccinated because it will be a lot more straightforward than getting a test every time they depart. In terms of some of the requirements, of course this allows us to change up to align the current testing requirements that apply to everyone who is currently moving at the border. So there will be the ability to potentially get some efficiencies there in our testing system. We have, from memory, anywhere in the order of, you know, 80,000 people over a three-week period getting tested as part of our existing surveillance testing at the border.

Claire, I'll let you finish up that one.

Media: I'm not quite done, sorry. For people who want to go into Auckland for a visit and then leave again, they're allowed in but they still have to have their test or vaccination pass to get out again?

PM: Correct. Yep. And then that's where, if anyone wants to day trip, it is advisable—it is much easier if you're vaccinated to come and go, because, obviously, you would need to stay and return a negative test before you can depart.

Media: Would rapid antigen testing be accepted as an acceptable negative test result?

PM: At this point, we're advising it would be PCR, but we haven't ruled out, potentially, any changes in the meantime.

Media: Not saliva, just PCR?

PM: PCR—saliva or nasal.

Media: Prime Minister, is today's announcement an admission that the idea to get all DHBs to 90 percent before any movement—was that a failure?

PM: No, not at all. In fact, you can see, already, nationally 91 percent first doses, and we have high confidence that there will be a number of DHBs who will be in that 90 percent space. However, we have to balance, of course, against those high rates of vaccination the need to also use the extra protection that this new framework provides, and it does provide greater protection. So we're being pragmatic about this decision.

Media: Then why, initially, did you not go for a blanket 90 percent throughout New Zealand, rather than the DHBs?

PM: We still, and I do absolutely believe that it has helped us to focus on lifting rates in individual locations, and we will continue to focus on that. And as you'll see, we're not moving New Zealand in a blanket way; we will differentiate. Those areas that are lower, we'll look to move into red. You'll remember at the original announcement we talked about moving the rest of the country into orange, so this is a way that we can acknowledge if an area hasn't reached those high vaccine rates.

Media: And just a question for Dr Bloomfield, has Cabinet followed your advice on here, or what was the Ministry of Health's advice on the December 15th move?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes, our advice was—and I don't know if it was actually codified in the Cabinet paper, but it was definitely to support the whole country going into the new framework at the same time, and, as the Prime Minister has said, it just affords a lot higher level of protection from the current alert level 2. We are seeing cases, of course, despite best efforts, escape from Auckland, and having all regions of the country being able to move on to the protection afforded by the vaccination passes sooner rather than later, was our very strong advice.

Media: But you backed the December 15th date?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: The December 15 date for the removal of the boundary around Auckland? Yes, that's correct.

PM: Look, let me see who I haven't come to. Yeah—Luke, and then I'll come across to you, Henry.

Media: Obviously, the focus today is bedding in, you know, either orange or red, when it comes to the start of December—

PM: I actually think for Aucklanders, the focus will be on the 15th of December.

Media: The 15th of December as well, but tell us—

PM: Different priorities.

Media: —a bit about alert level green. So, obviously, there's going to be a bit of COVID all over the place. What will we sort of be looking for to move places that are in orange to green, down the track?

PM: Big focus for us today is, first, advising really clearly to New Zealand, on the 29th of November, we will be confirming the decision to move Auckland and the rest of the country into the new framework. That will occur very soon after that meeting. At the meeting, we will determine what level the country is moving into, and regions that are, you know, lower in vaccination rates can expect to go in at red. At that November 29 meeting, we will also work through and share a bit more detail on what it will take to move. But right now, my strong message for the whole country is: prepare for the new framework. It will provide us with greater protections. It's part of our new phase in our COVID-19 strategy, and we need to make sure that everyone is ready to go with their vaccine passes, and as businesses, ready to operationalise the new framework, because it's coming very soon.

Media: So when that's announced on November 29, there'll be more information about—

PM: About the movements—yep.

Media: —some of the movements, and—

PM: About what it will take to move up. But a core component, as you can see, is vaccination levels.

I think I did say—yeah, Luke, and then we'll come to you.

Media: Quickly for Dr Bloomfield on the Christchurch case, it said they attended an event in Auckland and came back down to Christchurch. What was the nature of that event, do you know?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes. I understand that was a tangi, and the other point I would make here is the person was fully vaccinated and travelled to Auckland and then returned and became symptomatic. And also, I understand, it's a family member in Auckland who is a case that they are linked to, so took all the appropriate actions. So, again, we've had this before in Christchurch and been able to, with early intervention, with testing and contact tracing, just isolate that and get around it.

PM: I did say Henry.

Media: On the traffic light system, and on these DHBs being in red if they're quite low—

PM: Yep—regions, yep.

Media: —regions—are you, I guess—is it TLA? Is that the region you're using? And are you using it as a punishment, because a red's supposed to be if the health system's under risk, but if there's no COVID in a place, the health system's not under risk, even if there's low vaccination rates.

PM: Yep. And, also, it notes action needed to protect at-risk populations. And, of course, one of the precursors that we set for moving in was high vaccination levels, so it will be a determining factor for where you enter into the system. Now, that is not to say that you won't be able to move up, or move up relatively quickly, but as we step in, you will see us be cautious and conservative in our stepping. And you'll remember we did the exact same thing for the alert level system. When we moved into it, we moved in and then very quickly moved up to the highest level. In part, that's to allow it to bed in, to see the impact of the new framework, to see the impact of what we may see as that extra movement from Auckland. We're going to be very cautious about the steps we take here.

Media: Would you expect somewhere like Wellington or Dunedin to move in at green given there's no community COVID and there's 90 percent vaccination?

PM: No area will step into this new framework at green, for the very reason that I've outlined. For this phase of our plan, we need to be cautious. We're stepping into a new framework. The way that we can do that with the most care and to protect both the vaccinated

and unvaccinated is to step in at those lower levels. The added advantage of that, though, is actually, for a vaccinated individual, they'll notice very few differences between green and those other levels, because—orange in particular: if you're vaccinated, you are able to do most if not all of the things that you generally enjoy.

Media: Minister Hipkins, the trans-Tasman bubble's up for review over the next couple of weeks. You've previously said to me that the biggest problem with that border is the fact that there's different alert levels and things going on across the country, and what the movement would do for that. Given that by the start of December, everyone will have moved into the same system, are you giving any consideration to re-inflating the bubble, so to speak, ahead of Christmas for the trans-Tasman so that Aussies—Kiwi Aussies—can have that Christmas together?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I think one of the key things that we want to achieve when we do any changes at the international border is try and do changes that will stick rather than changes that we might have to change when circumstances change. So that is certainly something that we keep in the backs of our minds. I think, as I indicated before, we do have to look at the picture of cumulative risk when we make decisions about the international border, and doing things at exactly the same time as we do them domestically potentially adds a lot of additional risk to the system all at the same time. And so I think that people should expect to see things stepped out carefully so that we can keep control of the situation, rather than do things all at once, which means, potentially, we don't.

Media: So can you just make that clear for people, then, now and say that the trans-Tasman bubble's effectively been moved into the first quarter of next year with all the rest of the vaccinated travel, and just so that people don't have that hope factor ahead of Christmas?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, Cabinet hasn't confirmed a decision about that, but I think it wouldn't be unreasonable for people to expect that there's not going to be significant change there until early next year.

PM: And we've actually consistently said that. We've said the next stage is home isolation, and we've indicated the first quarter of next year, but we know people want dates. We're looking to provide that level of detail before the end of the year. So we will give that level of detail.

Media: That first quarter that you have indicated, can you give any clearer time frame—

PM: That's what I just said: we are going to look to provide more specificity. Before the end of the year, we'll do that.

Media: Just on that issue, I mean, why does the Government continue to fearmonger in this regard? Like, the COVID Minister references opening the floodgates or refers to cumulative risk. The argument isn't for a broad opening of borders; it's to allow New Zealand citizens who are fully vaccinated and can prove it to come home.

PM: So let's—so, look, no one is fearmongering. What we're simply describing is the reality of what we will need to manage now and into the future, because, as the Minister has said, we don't want a situation where we make a change that we then have to move backwards on. We want to keep making safe and steady progress. So we have looked at all of the evidence and advice, and you'll see in many other countries around the world they are moving back into extra restrictions, including using their border. And it is fair to say that means that when we step into it, we do have to consider scale. Returning citizens, permanent residents, will be in the tens of thousands a week—tens of thousands. We're estimating that in some cases, we may get as many as 50,000 a week. So we do—sorry?

Media: You could taper that.

PM: Well, of course, there's many factors to consider around just equity issues for individuals travelling from different regions. We've considered a range of options. We know we need to give specificity but we also want to give that certainty that it will stay. We'll look to give that greater detail before the end of the year.

I'll give you a last one there, Ben, and then I'll come back to a few.

I will just let Ben ask that last question then we'll come to Amelia and then we'll finish up over in this corner.

Media: MBIE have said they wanted some time to assess how the new system to the seven day quarantine system would be until they reveal how many more places are. Do you have any initial indications how many places might be released before Christmas? Because it is a smaller number of people that are seeking the ballots each time.

Hon Chris Hipkins: I do just want to make clear there's a couple of things that inform that. I don't have an estimate of the number at this point. But there are a couple of things that determine that.

First of all, to be very, very clear, by halving the stay time, you don't double the number of rooms that are available because you've got the buffer time at the end of the stay where the rooms have to be cleaned and turned around. You effectively double the amount of time that rooms sit empty because of that turnaround time between bookings, and so on. And there's the inefficiencies that get built in by having shorter stays as well. And then, of course, we've converted some of our facilities into community MIQ facilities as well. So we're working our way through that process. There will be further voucher releases, though.

PM: Amelia.

Media: Thank you. Minister, could you please clarify, just on the vax passes, when will the verification app for businesses be available to download and will it be free? And then also, when will boosters appear in the app, and can you go through the detail of that?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So the verifying app is in development in the moment. It's just about done. I think they're going through their final trials, so that will be within the next couple of weeks that that will be available.

PM: You don't have to use it, though.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yeah. But the system itself will work without the verifier app, but it's an additional tool that will be available.

And the second part of question, which was about booster shots, we haven't made decisions on requirements around booster shots at this point, although I do envisage in the future, they will be built into the system. Each certificate is for six months, so when people come to renew their certificate, at that point it will be very clear whether—how we've built boosters into those requirements.

Media: And what about the younger or the older New Zealanders who don't have an email address, who don't have a smartphone, have you given them any consideration for them and what they're meant to do?

PM: Lots of consideration.

Hon Chris Hipkins: A lot of consideration. So there is an 0800 number live today, which means that they can phone up. They can be either talked through the process or they can request a certificate to be sent to them.

I know that for a number of older New Zealanders, that's actually going to be their preference to get that hard copy sent to them. And we're also looking at walk-up options as well—haven't got details on that today, but the ability for people to go to places in order to get their certificates printed.

Media: Twelve year olds can't call 0800 numbers, though, and it's not really safe for them to be walking up—

PM: Their family members can, though, and, of course, within your app passbook you've got the ability to have in your passbook your family members' COVID passes as well.

OK so, I'll come back over to this corner. Mark?

Media: Is part of the reason that the Auckland boundary—there won't be a hard boundary around Auckland from mid-January because you expect COVID to be not just in Auckland but everywhere else in New Zealand?

PM: Look, we always said that, you know, part of the COVID protection framework is that we won't be utilising hard borders in the way that we have had previously. And so this is an acknowledgement that, actually, Auckland has done incredibly well for what will be going on for four months to maintain that border and to reduce and slow the spread of COVID. But it was never intended to be a part of the long-term management of COVID-19.

Media: Do you have an expectation or any modelling that indicates case numbers, hospitalisations that you expect to see over the summer and into next year as a result of the whole country moving to the traffic light system?

PM: I'll perhaps pass to Dr Bloomfield. These things, as you can imagine, are very difficult to model and predict. But I'll hand over to Dr Bloomfield.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Two things. Yeah. One is I know that DPMC got some modelling just in the last day or two, which I haven't actually even seen yet, to look at. And that's looking on patterns of travel of people in and out of Auckland and where people are most likely to go to because that will be a significant determinant of where there might be cases.

But the second thing, of course, is that the modelling changes almost on day-by-day—certainly a weekly—basis, depending on the number of cases and where they are in the country. So it's updated very frequently.

PM: But ultimately, the decisions that we've made have been all with a view to prevent and slow. So, you know, the extra requirement of vaccine certificates, testing—all extra layers of protection, in that regard.

Media: Right now, we have just over 5,000 contacts or close contacts that we've identified. About a third of those haven't received a call from tracers; nearly half have yet to get a test or return a test result—

PM: You'll forgive me if I can't speak to some of the details of the metrics; I usually have a report on those with me, but I'll ask Dr Bloomfield.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Just two comments there. The first is: because of the larger number of cases each day, most of those ones that haven't yet been contacted are ones that have just recently come into the system. And, secondly, likewise with the test results—you'll be aware that the categories have changed recently, so the days in which people have tested have changed, and for some of those people it will be just awaiting that first day five test.

Media: And are you confident that contract tracing will be able to hold up under a higher caseload in the future?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes, it will be. So two aspects to that. The second is the caseload, our ability to follow up a large number of cases in the first place and identify contacts, that we're increasing our capacity there on a week-by-week basis. And I'm also confident in our contact tracing capacity, acknowledging again that the way we're using it has shifted to be very much focused on those very close and close contacts.

Media: On the northern boundary, how will that look different to the southern boundary around Auckland? What should people expect? Will the police checks there be tighter? And what—

PM: So we're leaving the enforcement, and decisions around enforcement and how to safely do that, up to the New Zealand Police. Obviously, they have operational discretion. But what we do know is that the police will speak and work with the local community in Northland to ensure that we get that balance between people being able to safely move, but also acknowledging that in that region where we do have lower vaccination rates, where we want to ensure as much as possible that we have good compliance.

Media: Should people expect more frequent checks from the police at the boundary there?

PM: They can expect that we are particularly mindful of low vaccines there, and there is lower vaccines currently in that region. But we are going to leave it up to the police to work with the local community on their enforcement practices there. We do have, obviously, another four weeks for them to work that through.

Media: You say that the country will move to the traffic-light system soon after the Cabinet meeting—

PM: Yep, as will Auckland.

Media: —on 29 November. What does soon after mean? Is that going to be like the typical 24-, 48-hour grace period that we've seen—

PM: Many New Zealanders are familiar with the way that we've moved in the past after decision making. Of course, we're wanting to give people sense of direction so they can plan for that, and we are doing that while still giving the ability of Cabinet to make those final decisions on the day.

Media: On the vaccine for five- to 11-year-olds, Dr Bloomfield, you just said in the Health Committee that it could be a matter of weeks for Medsafe to collect that data for Ministers to sign off. Are you guys wanting those vaccines to be rolled out before the Auckland border opens?

PM: We don't decide.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Mm hm. No, it won't be quite that quick. So the question I was asked was around information that it would be the middle of next year before Medsafe made a determination. My latest information is it will be a matter of weeks; likewise, our technical advisory group. And then there's a process to go through of getting Ministers' approval. And also, then, of course, we have to make sure we've got the vaccine. And we are planning for both receiving the vaccine and then being able to roll it out. But it won't be starting before the Auckland boundary finishes.

PM: Nor have we made any decisions with the assumption, or on the basis, that that would occur.

Media: Prime Minister, with the vaccine pass, why is there the function to be able to share that with someone else? And are you worried that that will mean people will just borrow someone's vaccine pass?

Hon Chris Hipkins: That's not quite correct. The framework allows people to do what they can do with documents that they put into their digital wallets. That doesn't mean that you can share your pass with somebody else, though, any more than you can share your paper copy with somebody else. Ultimately, that's deliberately designed to thwart the system, and that's one of the reasons why we will have a verifier app so that we can check—well, first of all, you can check someone's photo identity against the pass that they're using, to make sure it is their pass. The verifier app, the extra layer of protection that that will add is to prevent people doctoring their passes so that they put someone else's name on someone else's pass. And so there's three effective layers of protection there.

PM: Essentially, all we're saying is that a parent, of course, can support their children who are 12-plus with their identity documents, because most 12-year-olds don't necessarily carry a wallet or have a smartphone.

Hon Chris Hipkins: And, actually, it was also an issue for the disability community as well—that people who are supporting people with disabilities can carry the passes of themselves and the people who they're supporting, as well.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, on the Masterton case, where you have heard that it was a member of the Killer Beez who went to a tangi, can you give this a few more details on what you have been able to learn about that particular outbreak?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I don't have any more detail. What I will say is that there is a number of our cases at the moment that are associated with the Killer Beez gang, and we're getting a good response in terms of testing, which is important, and I want to thank them for that. But it seems our case in Masterton is separate from the other cases that are outside of Auckland associated with that gang, and it was associated with—it seems to be linked to a tangi in Auckland, but that's all the information I have at the moment.

Media: Prime Minister—

PM: Look, if I may, I am, Jenna, just going to stick to the speaking order that I had. I had Jenèe and then John and then I was going to try before the House to finish with—

Media: Can Aucklanders still expect a move to step 3 of level 3 before a move to the traffic light system?

PM: So we've given very strong indications of the time lines we expect for the COVID protection framework, which, of course, allows more in terms of activity and freedoms than the step to level 3.3. Of course, at this stage I never pre-empt any of the decisions by Cabinet, but that is something that Aucklanders I hope can see that they can plan towards.

Media: Just in terms of hospitality businesses—this is kind of who it really affects—are you suggesting they should wait until early December or after, you know, 29 November to reopen and plan to not open before then?

PM: Of course, what I'm indicating is that if they are looking for that certainty, that's why we're sending those very strong signals around the COVID protection framework, because obviously in between times we're making decisions at Cabinet, and, of course, the very nature of making those decisions before we reach those higher vaccination levels means it's more dependent on the outbreak.

Media: What, if any, impacts do you think today's decision will have on disinformation on social media, and what steps is the Government taking to raise concerns about misinformation with social media companies?

PM: So social media companies, you'll have seen, have in some cases taken their own steps—in many cases are taking their own steps. For us, it is a matter, I think, of just continually putting out as much information on as many channels as we can, making sure that we have a range of voices who are able to access that accurate information. But I have to say this is one of many areas where it is a new frontier, as we enter into a phase where people increasingly access their information via non-traditional sources, that we will all, I think, be battling now and into the future the issue of misinformation and disinformation. We do have, you know—we are reaching out to others to share their views on what we can do, but it is an area where I think we're all working to try and build some expertise and better understanding of how to deal with this new-ish phenomenon.

Media: Prime Minister, on the issue of mandates, what can you say to hospitality, retail who are looking for legislative protection or Government directions so that they can use the certificates and look to open after 29th?

PM: Oh, well, there we've given absolute clarity for hospitality or those areas where vaccine certificates are part of the framework and that they, you know—that they are expected to or will be using them. They can require staff to be vaccinated. And that's because for the very reason that, actually, if you have a requirement for patrons to use vaccine certificates, it's not unreasonable to expect that those then working in that environment do as well.

Media: And what about customers? Could I rock up to a place that has a vaccine mandate for staff and say, "Well, I don't need to provide my certificate to say I'm vaccinated, for customers.?"

PM: So you'll see at the different levels that if you're operating with a vaccine certificate, if a business is a hospitality business, then actually they've got two options. The very simple

version of explaining it is: if you want to be open and you want to have as many customers as possible, you'll need to run vaccine certificates. That will require both the patron to have them and, of course, your staff to be vaccinated as well. There is, of course, though, the option if you're a business who chooses not to use a vaccine certificate, a hospitality business, you do have some options but they are considerably constrained. I don't think many people will choose those. At red, it means basically you're contactless, that you're still just doing pickups and drop-offs and I don't imagine many will choose that option.

Media: Prime Minister, do you regret saying this will be a short, sharp lockdown?

PM: We've traversed this many, many times. Had we not had the lockdown that we had in Tāmaki-makau-rau, had we not had all of Auckland support New Zealand in the way they have, we would have had Delta spread across New Zealand and outbreaks everywhere. Auckland has helped the country in immeasurable ways. OK, thank you everyone.

conclusion of press conference