

**ALL-OF-GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCE: WEDNESDAY, 13 APRIL 2022
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

Hon Chris Hipkins: Kia ora koutou everybody. Good afternoon. Today there are 9,495 new community cases of COVID-19 across Aotearoa, and again today it is good to see that we're seeing an ongoing decline in our seven-day rolling average of cases. There are 551 people in hospital; 27 of those are in ICU. Sadly, today the Ministry of Health is reporting a further 15 deaths from COVID-19. Everyone's sympathies will be with the families who have suffered from those losses. As always, further details on those case numbers will be provided in the 1 p.m. written update from the Ministry and released on the Ministry of Health's website.

It's been three weeks since we simplified the traffic light systems. In that time we've opened up outdoor gatherings to unlimited numbers and increased indoor gatherings to 200. We've also removed vaccine mandates for most workforces and ended the requirements around vaccine passes, though businesses can still continue to use those if they wish to.

Despite this significant relaxation in the settings, we've continued to see positive improvements in the overall trajectory of our COVID-19 Omicron outbreak. Since the last review of the settings 10 days ago, the seven-day rolling average of cases has now declined by 3,930 and case numbers now sit at under 10,000 cases a day for the first time since 24 February. Hospitalisations are also trending down, with over 100 fewer people on average in hospital across the country now than when we last reviewed the settings.

Importantly, hospitalisation in Auckland, where we know there's been significant pressure, has increased remarkably. For the first time since late February, all three Auckland hospitals are each reporting fewer than 100 patients with COVID-19 currently in hospital.

The extra good news is that planned care delivery is increasing day by day, and the decline in cases and hospitalisations, along with the arrival of new antiviral medications, means that the number of deaths is now also declining, from a seven-day rolling average of 20 a week to 13 now.

So right across the country the evidence is clear that the actions we have sustained mean that we are now coming off the peak and we're now well on the other side of it. In some places the cases are falling off quickly. In others they're plateauing and experiencing a slightly slower decline. But the overall picture is a very positive one. So on that basis, COVID-19 Ministers have confirmed that the whole of New Zealand will move to the orange traffic light setting from 11.59 p.m. tonight, Wednesday, 13 April, in time for the school holidays and for the Easter weekend.

So a quick recap of what does orange mean: there are no indoor or outdoor capacity limits, and the seated and separated rule for hospitality is removed, so bars, cafes, and restaurants will be able to fill up again. Face masks remain an important protection against COVID-19. Research shows that they can reduce transmission by up to 50 percent, so they'll continue to play a very important role in keeping case numbers down. At orange they remain an important protection. For this reason we continue to encourage the use of face masks when people are out and about in public, including on flights, retail, public transport, and in public facilities like libraries. For workers, face masks are still required at some gatherings and events, close proximity businesses like hairdressers, and food and drink businesses.

At schools, face masks are not required but are encouraged, and further guidance is being provided to schools. Where schools are experiencing an acute outbreak of COVID-19 cases they may introduce a local school requirement for masks to be worn for a period of time. We've also, as I went through yesterday in Parliament, been providing more guidance to schools around ventilation and how they can better use ventilation to reduce the transmission in a school setting.

There are no changes to the seven-day self-isolation requirement. So if you or if someone you live with gets COVID-19, you'll still be required to isolate. Isolation remains one of the best ways that we can break chains of transmission.

The next review of the traffic light settings will happen in mid-May; however, as we approach the winter months I do want to be clear here that we could well see an additional surge in influenza and, potentially, in COVID-19, and so that will inform the decisions we make in the future.

I've got one final message, and that is: now everybody can do all of the things that they've been able to do all along to protect themselves and to protect their whānau, so wearing a mask when out and about, particularly when in an indoor environment where you can't socially distance from others; staying home if unwell; making sure you are up to date with vaccinations—and if you haven't yet been boosted, please get boosted. We've got about a million New Zealanders who are eligible who haven't taken up that opportunity. The evidence is pretty clear that New Zealand has fared better in our dealing with the Omicron outbreak than many other countries because of the high rates of vaccination that we've achieved as a team, and so I'd encourage people who haven't taken up the opportunity to get boosted to do so.

So as we move into this next stage of our response, having survived the worst without experiencing the worst, while no one can be certain of what's ahead, and we know that new variants are emerging overseas and we'll continue to keep a close eye on that, but we can look forward to, I hope, school holidays with a little more normality than we've experienced in recent times.

Media: How much of this was a political decision around setting people free for the school holidays?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, probably the only difference there was a question of about 24 hours in timing—whether we did it from tonight or from tomorrow night. Ultimately, the case numbers, what we were seeing in terms of hospitalisation, was the thing that drove the decision. I pushed a bit harder to get all of the administration ready earlier so that we could do it from tonight, just to give people that extra lead time, but, ultimately, the evidence stacks up very strongly in favour of the move to orange.

Media: With the masking in schools, why have you left that up to schools? Why not extend that mask mandate like a lot of epidemiologists and paediatricians have been calling for?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, it won't be justified in all cases any longer. In some cases, schools will have had a COVID-19 outbreak that will have passed, and so they will have high rates of vaccination or high rates of natural immunity through people who have had COVID-19. Others might not be experiencing outbreaks at all. So it does move to a more localised response for schools.

Media: The one industry that this really affects—hospitality—is going to face a weekend where Easter trading restrictions are in place instead of COVID restrictions. Did Cabinet consider, at all, removing those restrictions just for this year?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, we didn't, but it was one of the factors that informed the decision to move from midnight tonight as opposed to midnight tomorrow night so that they at least get a bit of a lead time.

Media: Can you clarify the rules around mask wearing. You mentioned that on flights it's no longer compulsory—is that right? It's encouraged?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Ultimately, airlines, of course, can set their own policies around vaccination and mask use, but the rules have changed around what's required by us, so we're still encouraging them on flights and public transport.

Media: What about retail and in shops and that sort of thing? And given the point you keep making about how effective mask wearing is, why not keep those stronger advices in place when you're opening up in other areas?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, there is still a requirement in many more places for there to be mask use, so I'd encourage people to familiarise themselves with that. But it won't be as widespread as it has been up until now.

Media: So apart from those workers that you mentioned, is there no sort of compulsory requirement now to wear a mask anywhere?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, no, there are still some areas, and, as I've mentioned, there are still some requirements around some workforces, for example, to be using masks.

Media: But apart from that, if you're out and about, if you're in a shop—I'm talking sort of more from like, I suppose, a consumer or community point of view—you don't have to wear it on a flight, you don't have to wear it in a shop, or anything like that; it's just encouraged now. Is that correct?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yeah. Now, sorry, for some reason I didn't bring the exact list—when we made those orange settings, we set all of that out, and for some reason I didn't bring that with me. So I'm happy to make sure that that list is well distributed.

Media: Can you address the risk, though—like, for example, on flights, you've got school holidays, we're going to have a lot of people flying around, you know, in airports and in confined spaces of flights. Isn't that a risk just in terms of the timing, and suddenly saying you don't have to wear a mask any more?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Ah, sorry, run that one past me again.

Media: So we're going into school holidays, and if masks are no longer mandatory from the Government side on flights, for example, isn't that a place where transmission—it's a high-risk transmission area? Why not keep the mask advice a bit stronger, even through orange, while you're opening up, like, gathering limits and that sort of thing?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I'll come back to you in a few moments, just on mask use on flights in particular. So just give me a few minutes on that one.

Media: So when are you required to wear a face mask now?

Hon Chris Hipkins: There are some workforces that are required to wear a face mask, and it's strongly encouraged for others.

Media: So you don't have to wear a face mask to the supermarket anymore?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No.

Media: Is your expectation for schools and masks essentially that unless they have a good reason not to be using masks they should be?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Sorry, just give me one minute. I've just got—masks are still a requirement on public transport, including flights. Sorry, my script was a little unclear about that, I understand.

Media: So can we just clarify, then—so mask wearing on public transport, including flights. I stand to be corrected, but I thought it was still in retail as well.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Let me just triple-check that I'm correct, and I'll come back to you on that in a moment. Sorry, I just didn't bring the list. It was, of course, several weeks ago we made that decision around masks, so let me just double-check that I'm getting it absolutely correct for you. If you just give me a few minutes, the advice will come through. I'll be clear on that. So we'll do some other questions in the meantime.

Media: Can I ask you for a point of clarification. You said today that tragically 15 people have died from COVID. Did they die from it or with it?

Hon Chris Hipkins: At the moment it's with COVID-19.

Media: You said "from", so—

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, well, the official statistics reflect people who have died with COVID-19. There is, again, a review to look at exactly what the cause of death was.

Media: Minister, people are visiting their elderly relatives in rest-care facilities this weekend. Should they be wearing face masks and adhering to physical distancing?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I'm just getting the absolute list, so I'm just waiting for the absolute list to come through, just because I don't want to give people guidance that is incorrect. I acknowledge that the script that I used probably wasn't as clear as it should've been, so I don't want to go into specific situations. Just give me a minute to get the full list through and then I'll go through the full list of when it is and isn't required, and then—

Media: Has Cabinet made any changes to the mask settings—

Hon Chris Hipkins: No. There's been no changes to what was previously announced, but I don't want to go into specifics of that without the list in front of me in case I get one or two of the settings wrong. The list should be through any minute now.

Media: Does it make sense, then, if you don't have to wear a mask in hospitality outlet where there can be a limitless crowd on a dance floor, with people within this close to each other—does it make sense to keep masks in when you're going shopping at the supermarket?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, I'll come back to you. Can we just park masks for a moment. Give me a minute on masks and then we'll come back to that.

Media: Just to keep on masks just for a little bit longer—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, no. I need a few minutes on masks. I'm happy to come back to that.

Media: Paediatricians were saying you should keep masks mandatory at schools—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Schools—I can definitely talk about that.

Media: —until the end of winter—at least get through to the end of winter. Did you not consider that, or did you consider that?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We absolutely considered the requirements around mask use at schools. Looking at a school-by-school basis, in some schools there is still a very strong justification for masks but not all. Hence we have made the decision there that schools will be able to make their own decisions around mask use, recognising again that there's implications there around age cohorts and so on. It is very challenging for schools. It is proving to be one of the most challenging COVID-19 requirements for schools to be enforcing.

Media: But are schools best placed to be making that call—if there is a very strong justification? Are they in the best position to be making that call about whether masks should be mandatory?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We've provided guidance to them, and, of course, they have access to public health guidance as well so that they can consider their particular circumstances and situations.

Media: Do you have data around transmission at schools through the Omicron outbreak?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Anecdotal. We know that most schools in the country have COVID-19 cases and that there's been transmission as a result of those cases. I don't have a specific number in front of me about that.

Media: Is that something, though, that you'd want to look at—because anecdotally there's a lot of cases coming out of schools and then taking it home. It's a potential vector for

transmission. Isn't that something you should have data on when you make these mask decisions, for example, about whether they're warranted or not?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We don't collect through our testing collection and we don't investigate now in the way that we did previously the source of transmission for every COVID-19 case. So when someone reports their rapid antigen test result we don't determine where they were given COVID by someone in their household or were they given COVID-19 by someone at school or whatever. So it's mostly kind of anecdotal data that we have now as opposed to hard data.

Media: Just data you can't collect because of the change in contact tracing and recording?

Hon Chris Hipkins: That's right. Well, we will have some data. I don't have it with me at the moment. A reasonable number of people fill in the contact tracing form but, again, a lot of people are not filling that contact tracing form in. So when you declare your positive result, we then send you a form which you fill in. So we have some data. I'll get the data to you for what we have.

Media: Minister, you mentioned before, with the next decision, you know, there could be things like the influenza outbreak influencing that decision. Can you just talk about if the other infectious diseases could be, I guess, incorporated into the traffic light system? So we could be in a situation where there's few COVID cases but we're seeing high influenza cases. Would you still be looking to retain the traffic light system?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, we are retaining the traffic light system—yes.

Media: Do you have the updated—?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I do have the updated list now. I've refreshed my memory of them and I was incorrect on retail, so my apologies for that. Yes, you still do need to wear a mask in a retail setting.

Media: So retail, public transport—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Retail and public transport are the two main ones. There are some other indoor areas like courts or tribunals, and local government premises, and when visiting healthcare services, which would include aged residential care facilities.

Media: Should you be across that detail?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, I just had a bit of a mind blank there, so I do apologise. That is my mistake; I will own that one.

Media: There's 9,000 cases today; 15 deaths. Is that the, sort of, normal level that you expect, or do you expect that to come down further?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Sorry, the—?

Media: Just 9,000 cases; 15 deaths. Is that the—?

Hon Chris Hipkins: It's still trending down, and so we—I'm optimistic that it will continue to trend down. But, you know, it's—the modelling would suggest that it will continue to trend down but, you know, there's always the possibility that we'll see an increase.

Media: Minister, coming back to Michael's question. The traffic light system: will it be specifically used for influenza?

Hon Chris Hipkins: It would depend on the relationship with COVID-19 cases as well.

Media: Well, will they be seen together when it comes to—

Hon Chris Hipkins: If we have a double whammy, where we see another spike in COVID-19 cases and a spike in influenza cases, then, yes, that will inform the decisions we make about our traffic light settings.

Media: But let's say that there's barely any COVID cases and we're seeing a spike in influenza. Could you use the traffic light system, and if so, is that disingenuous to the whole traffic light system in the context of COVID?

Hon Chris Hipkins: The traffic light system is a COVID-19 framework.

Media: Minister, how many New Zealanders do you think have actually had COVID, and how big a factor is the anticipated natural immunity in today's decision?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Very hard to tell, because, you know, there will be people who either didn't know they had COVID-19 or didn't report their results. It could be significantly more than the official statistics are showing.

Media: What's the highest possible number, do you think? Is it 1.5, 2 million, because we've heard—

Hon Chris Hipkins: It could be around the 2 million marker by now. Look, your crystal ball in terms of, you know, guessing that is just as good as the modellers', but the modelling suggests, you know, at the outer limits, it would be in that sort of 1.7 to 2 million kind of range at the upper end. It may be less than that.

Media: And how significant a factor was that in the decision that you've made today?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Overall, the case numbers that we've got and the level of vaccination that we've got—those were the bigger things that we were looking at today.

Media: Will the COVID support payments for businesses continue under orange?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We are moving to a—and look, the Minister of Finance is the one to talk in detail about this. But I want to be, you know—I think we've all been clear that we are moving to an environment where those payments are being phased out, and the move to orange has an implication for that.

Media: What about, like, the leave payments and that sort of thing, when workers are sick?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I don't have a detailed list of every payment, because there's a lot of things that we've been doing to support people who are, you know, isolating due to COVID-19. Happy to provide you the list of what continues at orange and what doesn't. I just don't have that with me.

Media: Can you explain the difference between a hospitality venue and a retail venue in terms of why masks will be required at one and not another? It would make sense if they had a vaccine pass. [*Inaudible*] originally designed, because you wouldn't need a vaccine pass at a retail outlet, but you don't need them in either now. So people can mix, they can sing, they can be as close as they like in a hospitality venue with no masks, but if they go to the supermarket or The Warehouse, they have to wear a mask the entire time. That doesn't seem to make sense.

Hon Chris Hipkins: In a hospitality venue, you'll typically be consuming food and drink. So, you know, that actually makes the use of masks—with the seated and separated rule no longer in place, that makes the use of masks less effective or less useful, because people drinking and walking around wouldn't be wearing masks and other people would be. In retail, people aren't going to be consuming food and drink.

Media: So you can have people pashing on a dancefloor, but I have to wear a mask to go to the supermarket?

Hon Chris Hipkins: At the moment, you still have to wear a mask in a retail environment; that is correct.

Media: Where is your logic on that?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Ultimately, it's a question of volume. There are going to be a lot more people in the supermarket on a weekly basis than there will be out and about pashing on a dance floor.

Media: What's the likelihood that New Zealand will see a green setting this year, or at least after this winter?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I've never put odds on any of those things, and I don't intend to start doing that now.

Media: What's the biggest difference that New Zealanders will see from moving to orange? Is it being able to dance on the dance floor at those indoor venues? What do you think is the biggest change?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I think, yeah, clearly the biggest change is the ability to have larger numbers of people indoors.

Media: People like Michael Baker have said the rest of New Zealand shouldn't move to orange; only Auckland should. So is it fair to say this is based on public health advice?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, it is based on the public health advice that we've relied on in all the decisions that we've made, which is from the public health teams at the Ministry of Health. All the way through the pandemic there have been other public health experts who have held different views. Of course, we hear them, we listen to them, but the ultimate public health advice that we receive comes through the Ministry of Health.

Media: The Prime Minister has previously recognised that the self-exemption criteria and the process to do that for masks has been a real sticking point, especially for retail, who are getting a lot of abuse. Have you made any decisions about that or firmed that up so that those retail workers aren't getting abused?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, and we're working really closely with the disability community around that. I haven't got an announcement to make on that immediately, but we are hoping to be in a position to announce some changes there to make that an easier system to use, and one that's easier for retail as well. So, yes, there's been quite a lot of work there. I acknowledge that some of the disability community have found the existing system quite traumatic as well, and so we're working closely with them to get a better process in place, then.

Media: When can we expect that?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Soon. Within the next couple of weeks, I hope, but I just don't have anything today to be able to announce on that.

Media: You've been working on it since August last year, haven't you?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, it's been a work in progress, yes.

Media: What level of COVID cases and deaths would be acceptable to you on an ongoing basis?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I think we—there's no such thing as an acceptable rate of death when you're dealing with an infectious disease. We do everything that we can to lower the death rate to as close to zero as we can possibly get it—but acknowledging that getting to absolutely zero is impossible.

Media: I mean, you're not doing everything you can; theoretically, you could stay at red, right? So there's a decision that you're making here. You're weighing up cases and deaths and hospitalisations and long COVID, and you're weighing up something else as well. So I'm just wondering at what point do you get to that equilibrium?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We have been monitoring—and, look, I get that this is a very sensitive topic. We have been monitoring the level of people dying in all of the different demographics and how that compares to what we would normally see in any given year, and at the moment we are seeing an increase on what we would normally see, but, you know, it's not a massive increase on what we would normally see.

Media: So is your, sort of, level of acceptable when there's no longer, sort of, excess deaths, essentially?

Hon Chris Hipkins: That's certainly what we'd be aiming for, yes.

Media: Minister, just as the Leader of the House, do you want to see Volodymyr Zelenskyy address New Zealand's Parliament?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I think it's somewhat undiplomatic and almost embarrassing for the New Zealand Parliament to move a motion like that without speaking to the Ukrainian President to see whether or not he wants to address the New Zealand Parliament. So I think if the New Zealand Parliament was going to pass such a motion, we would only do that after we had established that that was something that the Ukrainian President would actually welcome.

Media: Do you think we should make an approach to the Ukrainian President?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I'm not familiar with whether an approach has been made or not, Barry, but certainly our Government—including our Prime Minister—has been in regular contact with both the President and the Prime Minister of the Ukraine. They are well aware of the New Zealand support, and certainly if the President wanted to address the New Zealand Parliament, there would be no impediment—other than cross-party agreement, which I'm sure we would be able to secure—to that happening. It has happened before: Julia Gillard addressed us, albeit in person rather than via an electronic link. But I certainly think, you know, that would be available as an option. But I think issuing a formal invitation by motion in Parliament without first checking whether the person you're inviting is actually receptive to that—I don't know that that's the sort of politicking that we want to see in a situation like this.

Media: Would you like to see it?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I would welcome it if that was what the Ukrainian President wanted to do, but I don't think the New Zealand Parliament should pass a resolution effectively requiring it without talking to him about it first.

Media: Do you think, on the back of that, that there would be a benefit of him addressing New Zealand's Parliament, or it wouldn't kind of give us a better picture anyway?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, he's a busy guy. I think we've got to acknowledge that there's quite a lot happening for him at the moment. And I wouldn't want to put him in a position where we formally issued an invitation which he then felt he either had to do despite not having the time to do it or had to turn down. So, you know, I think this is one where we do have to rely on some diplomacy here rather than the politicking that is clearly evident in the fact that that motion has been put on Parliament's Order Paper.

Media: Can I just go back to the traffic lights? So what consultation did you have with Māori, and how receptive were they to having the traffic lights changed?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We've considered really closely, at every step of our decision making around COVID-19, the impact on Māori communities, where things sit in terms of the outbreak and how it's affecting Māori communities, how it's affecting our Pasifika communities, and so on. We have had regular feedback from our iwi leaders, from the various other forums, our Māori health providers—all have provided regular feedback on what they are seeing and how they are experiencing the outbreak. So in terms of the question of consultation, there hasn't been consultation around these sorts of decisions with any of the groups that we would normally consult with because of the sort of constraints that we have, but we've certainly received feedback from groups.

Media: So going forward, then, will you not be consulting with Māori going forward on any other issue to do with the strategy—

Hon Chris Hipkins: The word "consultation" in a public sector sense has a particular type of meaning, and we haven't run formal consultation processes around alert level decisions or around decisions about where we sit on the COVID-19 protection framework. The time constraints around that certainly would make that very difficult, but similarly we're relying on our public health advice in making these decisions. That's not to say, though, that we haven't received feedback and that we haven't taken that feedback on board. We absolutely have.

Media: So, just to be clear then, you will not be consulting but you will—

Hon Chris Hipkins: We'll continue to receive feedback from Māori communities. We'll continue to engage with them and we'll continue to have conversations with them—absolutely.

Media: And just one more question about mandatory vaccinations, then, for those that are still in place—they won't be changing?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, there's no changes to that at this point.

Media: Is there a date for the next review?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes. I indicated that, I think—mid-May. I can't remember whether I gave you a specific date in my talking points, but mid-May.

Media: Do you think if the COVID-19 response Minister is pretty confused about where you can and don't have to wear masks that the public will be able to understand—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, that was my mistake. I did not refresh my memory sufficiently about mask requirements at orange before I came down here. I apologise for that. That was my mistake. The guidance is very clear. Yes, I should have been familiar with that guidance before I came to do this. I will accept responsibility for the fact that I did not do that. There's been quite a lot going on.

Media: Is the guidance logical?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, it is, because it's based overall on the quantum of risk that we're trying to reduce.

Media: So why in a museum but not a nightclub?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Again, like I said, the serving of food and drink is the differentiating point between those types of settings.

Media: But it's not in schools, right?

Hon Chris Hipkins: What's that?

Media: But it's not in schools. You going to have classrooms—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Schools are a different environment. You know, schools—you still know who's been in a school. There's a lot of different things that can happen in a school. Kids are still largely contained within a relatively fixed group, and that is very different from a museum, where people are wandering around amongst potentially hundreds, if not thousands, of people all at the same time.

Media: Hundreds, if not thousands, of people are allowed into nightclubs—do you understand why that feels like a massive discrepancy?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, I do, but I don't know that we would receive a lot of compliance if we tried to get people wearing masks in a nightclub or a bar.

Media: So it's about compliance rather than actual health advice?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, it's a set of decisions that allows us to reopen that part of the hospitality industry, yes.

Media: Are you expecting this will lead to super-spreader events?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I think people do need to be aware that there will more risk in going into those types of environments than there is if they're going to the supermarket, and I think that people will make those own choices and decisions for themselves.

Media: Is this system still fit for purpose with this new variant [*Inaudible*]*—is it doing much anymore?*

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, it is. I mean, mask use—and there'll still be mask use in quite a range of environments—does turn down the risk by about 50 percent.

Media: Can you just clarify, because there'll be a lot of people visiting their granny or 90-year-old uncle this Easter weekend. When they go to the old-age home, what guidance or rules should they be following? Is it ad hoc for each aged care facility? There appears to be some so-called guidance on the Ministry of Health website, but it's not apparent what the rules are.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, aged residential care facilities of course are, by and large, private facilities, and so they get to determine their own rules of admission, as they have right the way through the pandemic. So people should follow the rules set by that facility.

Media: Will marae also be classified as setting their own rules—on marae?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, I don't think so, but let me come back to you on that one.

Media: Minister, the public sector pay freeze was announced almost a year ago—it was May the 5th. Should public servants be preparing for it to go into a second year?

Hon Chris Hipkins: There's a lot of bargaining going on, and we've got some big bargaining coming up. It is something that we keep under constant review. We are aware of the effects of inflation, the cost of living, on people. I don't have all of the ins and outs of that to go into with you today, but it's something that the Government keeps a good look at.

Media: Have you received any of the parts or early drafts of the long-term briefings that you set up in the Public Service Act 2020?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No.

Media: It's still too early?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I wouldn't expect necessarily to see the drafts. These are not documents that Ministers will sign off. These are documents that the Public Service will be preparing for the Parliament.

Media: The point of the freeze was to bridge that gap between people making less than \$60,000 and those making more. Have you had any indication over the last 11 months whether that's worked at all?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We've seen—I haven't got the latest figures in front of me, and it's very difficult to draw accurate conclusions about that, because of course a lot of the pay increases that have taken place over the last 18 months to two years were already in train before that guidance was issued. So if you think about teachers and nurses, for example, they had pay increases already in their collective agreements that were due to come in, and I think the last of the teacher ones came into effect this year—either last year or this year. So they would have come in during that time, and so hence the overall trajectory's still been going up. Across the time that we've been in Government, wage growth across the public sector still exceeded inflation up until this year. Now, we know that that's going to change.

Media: Will you hit a nightclub in orange?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Probably not.

Media: Why not?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I have two young kids.

Media: Would you feel safe to do so?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, I've had COVID-19 recently so I'm probably safer than a lot of people, and I've been fully vaccinated, but having said that, I'm just looking forward to spending a bit of time with my family over the Easter break. All right. Thanks very much everybody.

conclusion of press conference