

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 17 OCTOBER
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: All right, fakaalofa lahi atu, and good afternoon, everyone. This week, I will be in the House on Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday, I head to Auckland to discuss the country's economic progress with the Auckland Business Chamber and to meet new Auckland Mayor Wayne Brown, having recently met with the new Mayor of Christchurch, Phil Mauer, and Wellington mayor Tory Whānau. I'll return that afternoon to attend former Speaker and long-serving Labour MP Trevor Mallard's valedictory speech and farewell here at Parliament, with further meetings in Wellington on Friday.

On Saturday, I have the extraordinary privilege of attending the FIFA Women's World Cup draw to announce where each of the 32 competing teams will be based throughout next year's tournament, either here in New Zealand or with our co-hosts in Australia. It brings us a step closer to hosting what will be the world's largest women's sporting event ever and one of the largest sporting events in the world, and is a key part of our plan to accelerate our economic recovery. The live draw will be broadcast from Auckland, and advice from FIFA to officials estimates a global television audience that could exceed 1.2 to 1.6 billion. I'll speak alongside the FIFA president and Australian Minister of sport to showcase to the world what New Zealand has to offer as co-host and as a great place to visit. Given the impending benefits to our tourism and hospitality sectors, the Government has invested \$45 million in the event, with half of that funding going to upgrades of regional sporting facilities and training venues around the country to ensure that we provide not only top-notch sporting infrastructure for the beautiful game but that our sportspeople, young people, and regions across New Zealand continue to benefit from our hosting opportunity for years to come through improved facilities.

And, on that note, today I have further infrastructure announcements to make following Cabinet discussions. Learning from the lessons of the GFC, we've done things differently. Early on during the COVID pandemic, we knew that our economic recovery would rely heavily on investing in skills and training and delivering a pipeline infrastructure work. We took an opportunity to build back better by doing something about long-term infrastructure deficits. We moved hard and early to accelerate both funding streams and fast-track consenting to provide that certainty. The heart of that work is the RMA fast-track consenting process, which was established in 2020 after the first COVID lockdown, and, with three new projects having been approved for consideration, today marks the 56th project having gone through the process. Nearly half of those projects have already been approved by the independent panel. All three we are announcing today are housing projects and, if consented, will provide almost 900 homes in Queenstown and Auckland—areas experiencing high housing demand. It also marks our 20th Auckland housing project through the process.

A redevelopment project in Lake Hayes in Queenstown will create up to 748 more homes and include a park-and-ride facility to promote public transport use, and potentially a new school with the potential for over 300 jobs. Secondly, the Kepa Road Apartments—a residential development in Kohimarama, Auckland—will see the development of 58 homes in two buildings up to seven stories high. The project is estimated to create nearly 200 jobs. And the Wellsford North project in North Auckland will see the construction of a medium-density subdivision for 85 residential units, with construction creating over 400 jobs.

To date, the 56 projects referred cover 12 of New Zealand's 16 regions. Together, they have the potential to create more than 40,000 jobs and enable more than 11,000 houses. During the GFC response, we sadly saw a downturn in New Zealand's housing supply, but despite COVID being an even worse economic crisis, initiatives like these announced today prove that we can forge an alternative path which sees us up our historic housing supply as part of our recovery.

Across New Zealand, the fast-track process has granted consents for a range of projects outside of housing too: the construction of a water reservoir in Northland to support

horticulture, the redevelopment of the Picton ferry terminal to enable more people and freight to travel between the North and South Islands, and the construction of the new Dunedin Hospital. All of these projects will be being built faster—on average, 15 months quicker per project—and for larger infrastructure projects it can reduce consenting time by 18 to 24 months, bringing jobs online sooner, and is one of the key contributors to our near - record low unemployment rate.

The fast-track consenting sits alongside our Infrastructure Acceleration Fund, which last week supported a further 11,500 homes to be built in Lower Hutt, Nelson, Rangiora, Ngāruawāhia, Hastings, Motueka, Whanganui, and Lake Hāwea, by investing in the critical infrastructure that are necessary in order to build homes—pipes, roads, waste water connections. Growing our economy and creating new jobs or keeping a lid on debt are a core component of our plan to rebuild from COVID. They've helped New Zealand to recently produce one of the best sets of Government books in the world at a time of increasing volatility in the global economy. For now, though, I am happy to take your questions.

Media: Why are you not speaking out more vehemently in support of Iranian women?

PM: I would contest that I am.

Media: Why do you say that? Why do you disagree with that?

PM: Because, since the beginning of the month, I have been absolutely consistent on our deep concern around people's, firstly, ability to exercise their own religious freedoms in the way that they choose, be it women and girls in Iran or women and girls in Afghanistan, where we've also been very clear. Also, at the beginning of the month—it was not widely reported—but we called in, at my request, the ambassador of Iran to explain and share directly our deep concerns over what we were observing.

Media: Do you feel like you're using your megaphone in the right way over this issue?

PM: I can say it; whether or not it's reported is another matter. Because, as I've just shared, on 3 October, we were sharing very publicly our concerns—and reporting, of course, that at that time we had brought in the Iranian ambassador—and yet I don't believe that that's something that's necessarily widely known.

Media: Today, in Rotorua, more than 30 businesses closed their doors in protest of not being able to get enough staff into the country. One of their biggest concerns is how long it's taking to get the job check from Immigration New Zealand under the accredited work visa programme. Do you have any concerns about the processing times for that job check?

PM: So I'm told that, on average, we're processing visitor visa applications at the moment in 15 working days—50 percent are done in this time—and 90 percent of applications are processed within 35; that's for visitor visas. You're interested, though, in the job check process. I'm happy to get you an updated figure. Keep in mind, though, we know that one of the big sources for hospitality and seasonal work has tended to be working holiday. We've had tens of thousands of working holiday visas issued in as little as 14 working days. So those are being issued quickly. The issue is when people are then choosing to travel to New Zealand. Naturally, perhaps, I believe people are likely to be waiting for our summer months. Of course, it would be in everyone's interests if we saw those numbers picking up quickly. We are seeing a rise, and I believe that will continue.

Media: Only a third have actually arrived in the country so far—

PM: Yes.

Media: —and you were promising that this would be the pipeline of workers ahead of summer. Will it be the pipeline that you promised it would be?

PM: The point we're making here is that tens of thousands of working holiday visas have been issued. The issue now is that, in a global shortage of particularly workers in tourism and hospitality, New Zealand is not alone. We now have to make sure that, of course, we're

the most attractive place for those working holiday visa - holders to visit. The fact they've sought visas with us is a good first start. Next, we need them to travel.

Media: How do you incentivise them to then come to the country? Is there anything else that you're looking at to bring them here faster? Refunding them once they get to the country, perhaps, for that visa?

PM: I think the fact that people are seeking their working holiday visas for New Zealand in the first place does say we're an attractive place to visit. That is where people are seeking to come. It comes down to their decision around when they then choose to travel. Here, there are two things at play. We know that it has become more expensive to travel globally, and so that may well be one of the factors, but I think possibly one of the bigger factors is likely to be that people have just come off the back of their summer where their home is, waiting for summer to kick in here in New Zealand. We have seen an increase as we've moved into those warmer months of those who are choosing to enter the country. And I am absolutely optimistic that will only continue.

Media: Prime Minister, you would have seen news stories this morning about \$10,000 worth of food being stolen from a food bank. There are other stories around various different break-ins across Auckland and other parts of the country. How concerned are you about this? And is the issue more of a poverty issue or a crime issue, or a combination of both?

PM: Look, I cannot tell you what is in the mind of someone who breaks into a food bank—I cannot. But what I can tell you is that the availability of support for people when they need it, we have worked very hard to provide—through COVID, of course, and that continues. We've increased the financial support for food banks to be able to provide for those families. We've increased Government support, of course, through, for instance, increases in benefit rates. We're now at a position where we've managed to then reverse the cuts that were experienced as far back as the 1990s. That's not to say there isn't still hardship out there, but we've taken significant measures, and there of course can never be justification for undertaking a criminal act and breaking into someone's property, particularly when they are providing for vulnerable communities.

Media: And just on another topic: did you see the comments of the Russian Ambassador to New Zealand about Nanaia Mahuta last week?

PM: Ah, hmm?

Media: He made some extremely derogatory comments to—

PM: Ah, no, I'm not sure that I—I've seen a few comments made about New Zealand specifically; I don't know that I've necessarily seen the ones you're referring to.

Media: On Middlemore Hospital, an independent report's sort of come back saying the institution itself is struggling, saying it's dysfunctional, overcrowded, and unsafe, and this is off the back of the death of a woman. Is that good enough—the current state of that?

PM: Yeah, the first thing that I would say is that, of course—extraordinarily distressing, of course, that these reports have come off the back of a family member, someone's loved one. And so just acknowledging that in the first place. And, very sadly, as I understand, that second independent report has said that, of course, it may not have necessarily have changed the outcome. But that's not to say there aren't things to learn.

Two reports have been undertaken: one internal, one external. I think that demonstrates how seriously it has been taken, and rightly so. I'm still awaiting some final advice coming through from Te Whatu Ora in response to both of those reports. But I believe the internal one, which was conducted by a clinician—I believe they're working through the findings, then, of the external as well.

Media: Is the concern at the level where you would intervene?

PM: Well, obviously, the fact that we have had two reports, I think—and that's been instigated, rightly, at that level within Middlemore to make sure that we fully understand what

has happened and how can we, if possible, prevent occurrences in the future. But also being willing to just examine whether or not we've got a safe working environment for our staff who are in these critical roles. We know that our hospital system, during that time, was particularly under pressure. We've got to be willing to reflect back on these circumstances and be willing to learn from them, but I do just want to wait for the final assessment to come through.

Media: And just a change of tack: Australia's running a mission to expatriate 60 people out of Syria. Are you aware of any New Zealanders in that 60-person block being brought back to Australia out of Syria?

PM: Yes, so is this—I believe you may be referring to individuals who may be in camp or potentially be recognised as—

Media: Yeah, wives and children.

PM: Of course, this does tip into the space of potentially foreign terrorist fighters. You will be aware that there's been some that have been publically reported on. There's often a lack of clarity, sometimes, as to the citizenship of some individuals in camps which are highly complex, very difficult environments, and not necessarily with accurate registers of who is present, and, as I say, their citizenship. So we have, of course, talked publically about some in the past, but there is a bit of a lack of clarity, in quite a complex environment, as to whether or not there are others.

Media: But there might be some New Zealand citizens?

PM: Yes, there may well. But, again, it's a very, very difficult environment.

Media: Prime Minister, you've announced some infrastructure changes. Do you think there is—

PM: Infrastructure projects through fast-track consenting, yep.

Media: Do you think there is enough infrastructure being built for the population growth that New Zealand can expect in the next 10 to 20 years?

PM: Well, of course, that's one of the reasons that we have the Infrastructure Commission is to make sure that we have a pipeline of work. But, at the same time, I think we have to also be mindful it's not just about schools and hospitals where we do, you know, projection work around population work.

One of the areas where we've fallen down in the past is areas where we don't always hold all of the levers—private residential construction, for example. We've had a housing supply shortfall in the tens of thousands. There previously hasn't been perhaps enough Government intervention to continue to stimulate supply. My view is that we have rightly taken a different tack by trying to ensure that when we have a potential for there to be a downturn that we've continued to stimulate activity in the residential construction space. So that means that whilst we don't have a population plan, per se, we already know the shortfall we have. We've been working very hard to plug that gap and we have reduced it.

Media: So the Infrastructure Commission said there's a hundred-billion dollar shortfall from the last 30 years and another hundred billion will be needed to cope with 0.7 percent population growth per year. The last 10 years we've had 1.4 percent population growth. Why then did the Government remove its planning ranges last week on immigration?

PM: Sorry? Our planning ranges? So that's previously—you'll know that for Immigration New Zealand there's often been I think a bit of a false debate of sorts about somehow New Zealand having a cap on immigration. That is wrong, and I think sometimes the planning ranges have confused that. What we've been very clear on in our immigration reset and rebalance is that what New Zealand is seeking is to ensure that we give greater certainty. Previously people have entered the country on temporary visas without long-term certainty around their prospects and their families' prospects, and they've continued to roll over on temporary visas. Now, that impacts our long-term population growth but without necessarily affecting residency. So our message has been: New Zealand, it's not sustainable for us to

continue that way and nor is it fair. And so what we're seeking to do is to give greater certainty to skilled migrants entering into the country, that they're able to stay, be much clearer for those for whom they are more likely to be short term, lest we continue to be one of the highest in the OECD relying on temporary labour—not good for everyone.

Media: So what then is your expectation about how much migration we're going to have in the next few years? Because you've just removed this planning range, which was there in place by various Governments and was used to change the points targets for skilled migrants programme.

PM: And, of course, we at the moment are out consulting on the settings for skilled migrants. But our belief is that of course we've got to make sure—and, you know, you see the projections around what we're expecting. Based on the number of job checks that we're doing at the moment, there's over 50,000 out currently. But, again, we've also got to make sure that alongside that we do have a plan for building long-term housing. If you're asking me what is the precise number of migrants likely to enter into the country, I cannot tell you that number right now.

Media: Prime Minister, you have an online appearance for Julia Gillard this week, obviously tied to the back of her 10th anniversary of the misogyny speech that she's done. I just thought I'd ask you for your memories of that speech at the time and just if you can clarify what your relationship with Ms Gillard is. Is she a mate or is she a sounding board or is she something else?

PM: Yeah, so she's someone that I've had a couple of interactions with over the years. I've been interviewed by her. I've met with her in the margins of other panels that we've sat on. So, really, friendly when we've had the opportunity to meet but it hasn't been particularly regular. I do remember the misogyny speech well. I find it hard to fathom that it was 10 years ago. But I think the way that I would describe it is I can't speak to what it is to be a female politician in any other jurisdiction. I can only speak to my experience in New Zealand, and I would say it's probably quite different to Australia. I've had the benefit of coming in on a path that's already been carved by other female politicians and Prime Ministers. I was not the first and that makes a difference. Watching from afar, when I saw the misogyny speech, I remember at the time feeling like she was placing a stake in the ground for herself personally and fighting back on what she had personally experienced, and it was quite something to witness.

Media: Why do you say you think your experience would be different from Australia, aside from being the first woman—

PM: Well, of course, aside from that, that's actually in itself quite a major thing. You know, having two female Prime Ministers before you, that means that they've spent time in office removing or at least taking on some of those challenges around being a first and some of the challenges that may come with being a female in leadership. I just think fundamentally my experience has been different. I have not recalled, during the time that I've campaigned, it being particularly remarked upon domestically that I'm a woman; I just haven't experienced that in the same way.

Media: Have you ever been close to sort of—

PM: It doesn't mean that it's plain sailing, but I don't think it's nearly as pronounced as it otherwise might have been.

Media: Have you ever been close to getting one of those sort of impassioned moments?

PM: Not in the Chamber—not in the Chamber. Yeah, there might be the odd occasion—you know, in an exchange—but I just haven't experienced it in such a blatant way in Parliament itself and in the debating chamber itself. I do think the New Zealand environment is a bit different to the Australian one, from what I've observed.

Media: Does Paul Eagle have your backing for candidacy for the Rongotai electorate?

PM: So do you mind, Jennifer, if I just canvas around? I thought you might be coming in on the same topic, but I'll canvas around then I'll come back to you.

Media: Just on the latest COVID numbers—there's been an uptick. What do you make of it and have you taken advice on where it might head?

PM: So you'll recall, I hope, that we did talk at the time that we removed the traffic light regime—the COVID protection framework—that we did expect there to be another uptick, and, like clockwork, that is what we are seeing. So it is not counter to what we expected; it was modelled. But what was also modelled was that it was not likely to be as significant as what we have experienced earlier in 2022. The basis of that modelling was assumptions around waning immunity and just the time frames for when we're tending to see increases in cases. I don't believe, from my recollection, and some of what I've seen reported is I don't know that it's fair to say at this point that it's necessarily strictly variant-related. Some of the new variants overseas are, at the moment, I think we are reported, taking up roughly 10 percent or maybe more of cases at this stage. But that may be, in the future, one of the contributing factors, too.

Media: Australia is removing their five-day isolation period by the looks of it. Is that something you have considered or will be considering shortly?

PM: So yes, we will be considering that shortly. We'll be speaking to that this week. But what I would just say is, as you can imagine, we'll be factoring in the fact that, as expected, we are seeing a bit of an uptick at the moment. But the advice continues to be from health that isolating COVID cases continues to be a really important part of continuing to manage numbers.

Media: So it's likely to stay?

PM: I'll leave it to later this week. But it is obviously one of the things we are factoring in.

Media: The Minister of Health, this afternoon, reported about 5,000 hospitalisations had been miscounted. Can you explain about how that happened?

PM: Yeah, sorry. Forgive me, I did actually mention to the team that I'd get into—it seemed to be a coding error. But I can't speak to it in detail, so I might come back to you if I may. It wasn't set out to me beyond that. I think they might have put some more context in the press statement, but please let me just go away and dig into it a bit more.

Media: Would that have had any impact on decisions the Government was making?

PM: No, I don't believe so. No. Of course, we were deeply concerned all the way through around managing the impact on hospitals. We had that concern throughout, and were seeking to manage that concern throughout, and we continue to factor it in to our thinking.

Media: The Director-General of the World Health Organization called last week on countries to make plans for long COVID—for managing the impacts on society and health systems. Is that something New Zealand would look to do?

PM: Yeah, so I think I saw that there was generally also just calling for countries to have a long-term plan. And so, look, for COVID management, of course, we continue to have our variant plan in place. Of course, the significant work we're doing investing in our health system to ensure that it is more robust and on a stronger footing. Specifically on long COVID, there is a task force that has been established by the Ministry of Health. I'm advised it's predominantly clinical, but to provide more advice on how we can better manage and better support those with long COVID. I note that the Director-General also recommended that countries make more widely available antivirals, and that's something I'm already confident that we've moved on to ease that access and provide it for those most at risk.

Media: The Government provided a lot of funding for research into COVID vaccines back in 2020. Would you look to provide funding into treatments for long COVID?

PM: Good question. Look, it hasn't been put to me but I wouldn't rule it out. I don't think we, at this stage, know the full extent of the impacts of COVID on the overall population health. We don't know the impacts, for instance, and whether or not we've been able to do—there's been at least some research on whether or not we've lessened long COVID impacts through vaccine. But it was one of the reasons why we were so cautious in our COVID strategy, because we just didn't know the impact it would have were we to have large-scale outbreaks before vaccination. But I wouldn't rule it out.

Media: Does Shakespeare still have relevancy in modern-day New Zealand, in your opinion? Because Creative New Zealand seems to be saying otherwise.

PM: Look, my view is a very simple one. I was a participant in Shakespeare in schools, I thought it was a great programme. You know, there's often a limited range of things that kids who are interested in drama and speech and debate have opportunities to engage with other schools. And I was one of those kids, and so I'd like to continue to see other kids have those opportunities.

I don't make those funding decisions; Government doesn't make those funding decisions. But I am hoping that the parties involved will be able to work it through. I think it would be wrong to extrapolate this discussion out into, somehow, a wider reflection on society as a whole. I think that would be a bit of an overreach. This is simply a question of whether an arts programme in schools continues to receive Creative New Zealand funding.

Media: What was your role, and how old were you when you performed?

PM: I don't know whether or not this furthers the debate or whether it lends itself towards a distraction, so I might just leave out the details for now.

Media: On the Child Poverty Report, Bryan Perry acknowledged there were limitations in the data—it doesn't capture, you know, the ongoing things from COVID; inflation. It also doesn't draw from any data from people who aren't in permanent housing, so no emergency housing—

PM: Not the case for material hardship, I understand. So I believe that for material hardship the survey does pick up people in non-private dwellings, but for the household economic survey, it doesn't. But what Bryan Perry also pointed out is he did not believe that it would have a statistical impact on that survey because of the numbers, which would be within the margin of error.

Media: Would you be looking at getting any surveys, you know, to have a wider snapshot of what was really happening before celebrating things are trending downwards?

PM: Well, first of all, you know, we rely on the data. And I'd like to think that, yes, we have acknowledged that poverty trend on the nine measures—which includes material hardship, which includes people in a range of dwellings. We have acknowledged that they have started to turn from increasing to decreasing. But I would not say that we have ever celebrated anyone in poverty. There are still people who live in extraordinary circumstances, and we continue to work hard to turn that around.

The only final thing I'd note is that actually we are putting extra funding in to try and measure persistent poverty. It's one of the measures that we set out in the child poverty Act that we wanted to be able to measure. We don't have consistent measurement in that space; it's quite a hard survey to do. We funded it and Statistics New Zealand continue to work on how they would establish it. So it is an area we are very interested in making sure we have more robust data on.

Media: Sorry, just back on the COVID question: when do you see COVID restrictions ending—all rules ending?

PM: Well, I mean, at the moment, the protections we have in place are very slimmed down, but they are the things that we believe—with the current variants we have and COVID

at the stage it's in—make the biggest difference. And they are simply: asking people who have COVID to stay at home, and when you go into environments like healthcare settings to wear masks. I think New Zealanders really understand and appreciate why they continue to be really important steps, because we are still going through a period where we will still have waves, and we are experiencing that now.

Media: By the end of the year—by the end of next year?

PM: I've always been cautious about making too many predictions about COVID. What I can tell you is that we are in a very different place than we were a year ago: highly vaccinated, antivirals, and we know so much more. You won't see things like some of those more necessary but harsh measures—they're off the table. But we do still ask people who are sick to stay home.

Media: But you can't commit to them ending by the end of next year?

PM: So when would we take off the requirement for people who are sick to stay home? I can't tell you when that might be, but we do review it regularly: at the moment, every four weeks.

Media: And just the question that I asked before—does Paul Eagle have your backing for the Rongotai candidacy for 2023?

PM: Look, I do need to be careful here, because ultimately I have no hand in that decision; it's of course a decision made by local members in Rongotai. So I would say that were you to ask me about any member of our caucus, I don't want to take away from the local membership's decision, lest I get an angry email about that!

Media: Not every member of your caucus has taken a gamble on a mayoralty, though.

PM: Look, ultimately, I am surrounded in our caucus by good people—I am. And I support them as our caucus members.

Amelia, can I come back to you? I've just got the numbers for you. The time for an employer to be accredited in order to then go forward and start advertising for people offshore—that's taking five days on average. Then if they've got a particular job they want to advertise, approval for a migrant to fill the job is six days on average. Then the visa being granted to a worker coming in is 11 days on average. So pretty tight, yeah.

Media: Someone told us today six to eight weeks they were having to wait for that job check process.

PM: That may have been—potentially, and look, these are on average. So if there is incomplete information, it could possibly take longer, and earlier on it was taking longer, but these are average figures. And at the moment, we have 62,400 positions that are able to be recruited for offshore. So you can see, you know, the ability for people to come in is there. The issue is there is a global shortage and a global hunt on right now for workers.

Media: Just following up on the Paul Eagle question, is it a privilege to be a member of Parliament?

PM: I consider it to be. Not every member of the public may see it that way, but I do, and I consider myself to be privileged to have been here for the time I have.

Media: Representing the people of Rongotai—should that be a privilege? Should he be hungry for the job?

PM: Look, it is a privilege to be a member of Parliament. It's a privilege to represent New Zealanders, be it council, mayoralty, or an MP position. It is up to individuals, of course, to make their future career choices, though, and where they believe their skills are best applied.

Media: Just on RMA reform, in Minister Parker's statement today he talked about the three pieces of legislation that will ultimately replace the RMA passing this parliamentary term.

Given political parties have spent the best part of the last decade talking about RMA reform, why is this so little of a priority?

PM: I would disagree that it is.

Media: Well, you've been in Government for five-odd years.

PM: And that entire time—and one of the last stages of this process is putting it before the House. So much work has gone into preparing what is such a technical piece of legislation. So you had in our first term in office, of course, the review—the Randerson review—in order to lay the groundwork for it. Of course, we then had a preliminary process using select committee. Drafting has obviously taken a significant amount of time. Then it goes back before the House. I would say it absolutely has been a priority. It's also been priority to get it right.

Media: Would you consider that you might need to—because the sunset clause on the fast-tracking; I think it's July next year, but it's extend it because of Delta. Is there a situation where you end up extending that again, as well?

PM: Look, there are things to have been learnt by fast-tracking, and I think that's something that Minister Parker has been taking into consideration as we've been going through the process of repealing and replacing the Resource Management Act. What can we learn though that? What was beneficial about the process? What potentially prevented people from having their say in areas where they should? And so that's something that I believe he'll probably speak to when we come back to presenting the outcome before Parliament.

Media: So is there a suggestion there that some of the elements of the fast-tracking may actually end up being—

PM: I'll let Minister Parker speak in more detail to it.

Media: But is that something you'd like to see? Because the reality is that without the fast-tracking, the progress would be fairly horrendous probably.

PM: Fast-tracking has taught us a lot—no doubt—but all I'm signalling is a desire to just let Minister Parker speak to that in a little more detail. I might start to wrap up.

Media: Just on COVID, are we expecting another wave before the end of the year?

PM: Yes—yes. And, look, that has been signalled. I accept that not everyone may have seen that modelling or that signalling or the fact that we spoke to it some time ago, but it is a demonstration that COVID in some ways has some patterns that we continue to see, and so this one was predicted as a result of potentially waning immunity and potentially, of course, the changes that we see in variants. Again, really important to say we don't expect it to be worse than the other waves we've had this year by any stretch.

Media: So we probably need to order in some more anti-virals. Is that—

PM: I've had no suggestion that our anti-viral stores are insufficient or inadequate.

Media: Why is the Government not considering isolation payments for workers who contracted monkeypox? It's a small amount of people but it would make a massive amount—

PM: Of course, things like isolation payments are only one way to provide support. We have the community connectors, for instance, as well. I think some conversations are still ongoing, so I won't conclude, you know, and put my pen down on what will or won't be provided, because we are still talking. It is, of course, a small group, but it's a longer period of time, so we are just considering what support might be most appropriate in those circumstances.

Media: So you see and understand the vulnerability there?

PM: Oh yeah. Absolutely. And we've had the recent experience, of course, provided through COVID. In this case, of course, though, it's a long isolation period as well.

Media: Prime Minister, on housing in the RMA, what's the Government's view on a bunch of councils who have either not agreed to comply with the densification changes made by the Government, or in Auckland's case they've submitted a plan which removes most of the bits of Auckland where there needs to be densification?

PM: I'll make a general statement on this, because actually, you know, the housing Minister and the Minister for the Environment, I think, are keen to engage with new mayors and new councils, but by and large, what I've seen is a general shared view that we have to provide housing for our communities. Rotorua's a really good example—population growth of over 8,000 people, and in that time, consents numbered 1,500. There just weren't enough houses being built for the population. Now, there's a couple of reasons for that: in some cases it may be that there are planning issues; in others, it may be that the infrastructure isn't there. We've stepped in to try and turn that around, just last week announcing further projects. We will be investing in the likes of, for instance, sewerage, storm water—essentially three waters—to ensure that up to 11,000 houses can be built across communities. But we do need to make sure that we are sitting down and ensuring that we're working together, because we, of course, can't fix these issues alone; we need council support as well.

Media: I just wanted to raise with you a specific part of the report that the fellow from the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine wrote that it was only through the exceptional hard work and dedication of Middlemore staff that was keeping it from more serious incidents. Do you appreciate that that's a huge amount of pressure to have on staff that they bust their gut every day for people not to be dying or more seriously injured, and, in light of the Government not doing anything immediately, that that pressure will continue indefinitely?

PM: Well, one thing I would say is just the idea that we haven't done anything immediately. I'd just caution that whilst I can't provide you with the specific response to that report, keep in mind we are doing a lot of work to try and increase our workforce in the health system, which of course we know eases pressure, and that has been one of the issues across our hospital network. We continue to work very hard on that and that issue. So there's no waiting for the final response from Te Whatu Ora on that; we're getting on with that. When it comes to the acknowledgment of staff, I would absolutely share that. You know, this incident occurred at a time when there was a huge amount of pressure in our hospital system. We had the dual effects of flu, of COVID—flu, the likes of which we had not seen a wave like that before; and, of course COVID as well. It was a very difficult time. Whilst that report has acknowledged that there may not necessarily have been able to be another outcome, which would have been devastating for the family to read, we will still make sure that we learn from that report. Thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference