

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 23 MARCH 2020

PM: Good afternoon. Cabinet met, this morning, to discuss our next actions in the fight against COVID-19. Like the rest of the world, we are facing the potential for devastating impacts from this virus, but, through decisive action and by working together, we do have a small window to get ahead of it.

On Saturday, I announced a COVID-19 alert level system, and at that time we placed New Zealand at alert level two. I also said we should all be prepared to move quickly. Now is the time to put our plans into action. We are fortunate to still be some way behind the majority of overseas countries in terms of cases, but the trajectory is very clear: act now or risk the virus taking hold, as it has elsewhere.

We currently have 102 cases. But so did Italy once; now the virus has overwhelmed their health system and hundreds of people are dying every day. The situation here is moving at pace, and so must we. We have always said we would act early, decisively, and go hard—and we will.

Today, 36 new cases were announced. While the majority of these cases continue to be linked to overseas travel in some way, I can also confirm, as did the Director-General of Health, that we have two cases where public health officials have been unable to find how they came in contact with COVID-19. On that basis, we now consider there is transmission within our communities.

If community transmission takes off in New Zealand, the number of cases will double every five days. If that happens unchecked, our health system will be inundated and tens of thousands of New Zealanders will die. There is no easy way to say that, but it is the reality that we have seen overseas and the possibility that we must face here. Together, we must stop that from happening, and we can. Right now, we have a window of opportunity to break the chain of community transmission, to contain the virus, to stop it multiplying, and to protect New Zealanders from the worst.

Our plan is simple. We can stop the spread by staying at home and reducing contact. Now is the time to act. That's why Cabinet met today and agreed that, effective immediately, we will move to alert level three nationwide; after 48 hours—the time required to ensure essential services are in place—we will move to level four. These decisions will place the most significant restrictions on New Zealanders' movements in modern history. This is not a decision taken lightly, but it is our best chance to slow the virus and to save lives.

Let me set out what this will mean for everyone in practical terms. Supermarkets, doctors, pharmacies, service stations, access to essential banking services, will be available throughout New Zealand at every alert level. If you do not have immediate needs, do not go to the supermarket. It will be there for you today, it will be there for you tomorrow, and the day after that. We must give time for supermarkets to restock their shelves. There will be enough for everyone if we shop normally. Stock is not an issue in New Zealand. We will not run out of food.

In the meantime, we will be working through practices like those used overseas to make sure that, when people are visiting essential services, that we are maintaining social distance at all times. Non-essential businesses in New Zealand must now close. All bars, restaurants, cafes, cinemas, pools, museums, libraries, playgrounds, any other place where the public congregate, must close their face-to-face function.

Over the next 48 hours, those who provide, for instance, takeaway services must move to close their operations also. All indoor and outdoor events cannot proceed. In short, we are all now preparing as a nation to go into self-isolation, in the same way that we have seen many other countries do. Staying at home is essential. It's a simple but highly effective way

to constrain the virus. It denies it a place to go and will help give our healthcare system a fighting chance.

Over the next 48 hours, every workplace must implement alternative ways of working. People must work from home so that interactions with others are limited. Essential services will need to put in place alternative ways of working that ensure physical distancing of staff of two metres or utilise appropriate personal protective equipment.

Schools will be closed from tomorrow, except to the children of essential workers such as doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, police—and there will be others on that list. This will give them time to plan, but it will be temporary. Schools will close entirely from midnight on Wednesday. The school term break will be brought forward. For the remainder of the term, schools will establish ways to teaching online and remotely. All students across the country are currently being given information on this decision for their parents, including the list of who is considered an essential service. This will be communicated directly to parents, as well.

To be absolutely clear: we are now asking all New Zealanders who are outside essential services to stay at home and to stop all interaction with others outside of those in your household. I understand that self-isolation is a daunting prospect, so we are being practical. You can leave your home for fresh air, a walk, for exercise, to take your children outside, but please remember this simple principle: it must be solitary. We are asking you: only spend time with those you are in self-isolation with, and, if you are outside, keep your distance from others. That means two metres at all times. This is the single most important thing we can do right now to stop further community transmission.

Travel around New Zealand will also change. Over the next 48 hours, people will need to go home, be it locally or throughout the country. We have asked all air transport providers to ensure social distancing for that period. After 48 hours, we'll be moving to air travel only applying to the transport of people undertaking essential services and the transport of freight. Public transport will also begin to transition over the next 48 hours, and will only be available for those working in essential services, for medical reasons, and to move essential goods—including ferry services between the North and South Island.

Further details on the transition we are all now making will be made publicly available on the COVID-19 website. Now I want to share with you what will happen while we are all in alert level four to get ahead of COVID-19. We will continue to vigorously contact trace every single case. Testing will continue at pace to help us understand the current number of cases in New Zealand and where they are based. If we flush out the cases we already have and see transmission slow, we will potentially be able to move areas out of level four over time. But for the next wee while, things will look worse before they look better.

In the short term, the number of cases will likely rise because the virus is already in our community, but these new measures can slow the virus down and prevent our health system from being overwhelmed, and, ultimately, save lives. To be successful, though, to stop community transmission—which does have a lag time—these measures will need to be in place for four weeks. Again, I want to reiterate to you: you will be able to make regular visits to essential services in that time. Your supermarkets will not close. Your pharmacy and pharmaceutical products will be available. You will be able to access medical services.

If we, after those four weeks, have been successful, I hope then we will be able to ease these restrictions. If we haven't, we'll find ourselves living with them for longer. That is why sticking to the rules matters. If we don't—if you hang out with your friend at a park or see a family member for lunch—you risk spreading COVID-19 and extending the nation's time in level four.

Our low number of cases compared to the rest of the world gives us a chance that many others do not have. But it does not mean we have escaped. I do not underestimate what I am asking New Zealanders to do; it is huge. And I know it will feel daunting, but I wanted to share with you the stark choice that we have faced as Government: medical modelling considered by Cabinet today suggests that without the measures I have just announced, up

to tens of thousands of New Zealanders could die from COVID-19. Everything you will all give up for the next few weeks: all of the lost contact with others, all of the isolation and difficult time entertaining children, it will literally save lives—thousands of lives. The worst-case scenario is simply intolerable. It would represent the greatest loss of New Zealanders' lives in our history, and I will not take that chance. I would rather make this decision now and save those lives and be in lockdown for a shorter period than delay, see New Zealanders lose loved ones and their contact with each other for an even longer period. I hope that you are all with me on that decision.

Together we do have an opportunity to contain the spread and to prevent the worst. I cannot stress enough the need for every New Zealander to follow the advice I've laid out for you today. As a Government, we will—and I hope you have seen this—we will do everything in our power to protect you. Now I'm asking you to do everything you can to protect all of us. None of us can do this alone. Your actions will be critical to our collective ability to stop COVID-19. Failure of anyone to play their part in coming days will put the lives of others at risk, and there will be no tolerance for that. We will not hesitate to use our enforcement powers if needed. We are in this together. I'm in no doubt that the measures I've announced today will cause unprecedented economic and social disruption, but they are necessary.

I have one final message: be kind. I know people will want to act as enforcers, and I understand that; people are afraid, and they are anxious. But we—we will play the role of enforcer. What we need from you, our community, is you to support others. Go home tonight and check on your neighbours, start a phone tree with your street, plan how you'll keep in touch with one another. We will get through this together, but only if we stick together. So, please, be strong and be kind.

I'm now going to hand over to the Minister of Finance to set out the additional support measures agreed by Cabinet today to provide income guarantees to those whose livelihood is disrupted by the virus. Straight after that, we will take your questions. I'll then hand over to Minister Hipkins who will talk through some of the specific decisions as they relate to education. Following that, later this afternoon, we will be making available Commissioner of Police Mike Bush, who has been playing a key role in the operational side of our response to COVID-19; and John Ombler, the controller of the all-of-Government response; to speak with you and answer any additional operational questions that you may have on the announcement that I have made this afternoon. We will continue to provide that information as swiftly as we can. But you'll also see, we are moving swiftly, we are acting decisively, we continue to go hard and go early. I hand over now to Grant Robertson.

Hon Grant Robertson: Thank you very much, Prime Minister. In light of the shift towards level four, Cabinet today made a number of significant decisions to cushion the economic impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Firstly, the Cabinet agreed to expand the wage subsidy scheme that I announced last week. The lifting of the alert level means that every New Zealand business will be affected in some way, so Cabinet today agreed to remove the \$150,000 cap altogether. All businesses, self-employed, contractors, and other organisations that I'll outline shortly will be eligible. Now that many New Zealanders may not be able to go to work for the next few weeks, our priority is ensuring they continue to receive some form of income through this period.

We've also made a number of important changes to the scheme. Businesses that are less than a year old and firms that have had a significant increase in revenue in the past year are now also eligible. They will need to demonstrate revenue loss against a similar time period—for example, a 30 percent loss of income as a result of COVID-19 in March 2020 compared to January 2020. Self-employed people with variable monthly incomes are also now eligible if they can demonstrate revenue loss against the previous year's monthly average. The scheme also covers registered charities, non-government organisations, incorporated societies, and post-settlement governance entities. The expansion of the

scheme outlined today takes the estimated cost of the wage subsidy scheme from \$5.1 billion to \$9.3 billion.

The second decision that we have taken today is to freeze rent increases and to look to extend no-cause terminations to protect people during this difficult time. We will release more details of how we will operationalise that in the coming days. We know that for many New Zealanders, paying the rent is one of the biggest weekly bills they face, and we want to ensure that we ease any pressure on that.

Thirdly, today, the Government, the Reserve Bank, and our retail banks have agreed in principle to a business financing guarantee scheme to help cushion the impact of COVID-19. The scheme would leverage the Crown's balance sheet to enable banks to extend lending to firms which would otherwise be viable. In addition, the Government, the Reserve Bank, and our retail banks have also agreed in principle to significant support for mortgage holders. Meetings are taking place as we speak to finalise the details on this, which will also be announced in the coming couple of days.

We are also making urgent preparations for further income support for all workers as we move into alert number four. I want to say directly to employers and employees at this difficult time: please take the time to work through your options; talk to one another, get in touch with your bank, and together make a plan. We will make sure that all New Zealanders continue to receive some form of income through this period. The priority of our Government is the health and wellbeing of our people, and we will do what it takes to keep everybody safe. We are all in this together: he waka eke noa.

PM: All right, I'm happy to take questions.

Media: Prime Minister, can you give the public any kind of sense of how long we will be in that level four for?

PM: Yeah, I wanted to give the New Zealand public as much certainty as we can. So we have indicated the best advice we have is, in order to break transmission, in order to stop the spread and see the signs of that, four weeks is the minimum of what will be required. What we, of course, hope is that with everyone complying with the expectations that we've set out today, we will continue, we hope, to see a slow in the trend of cases. If we see that in particular areas, the intelligence from that testing in those areas may allow us to lift restrictions in specific areas. But, again, it will all come down to a level of compliance of everyone to what I have set out today.

Media: Prime Minister, if we'd started testing at capacity sooner, could we have taken these measures sooner?

PM: Oh look, no I don't believe, necessarily, that would have been the case. Keep in mind the large number of tests that have been undertaken—my recollection is somewhere in the order of 7,000 tests. We have two that have now told us that we have community transmission. We would have expected—if it was more widespread—perhaps to have seen more than that, but what we know from overseas is that once you detect it, it moves very quickly. So that is why we are moving now to try and stop that spread and ensure we do not overwhelm our health services.

Media: That four weeks, if you do start lifting those restrictions because you've seen the numbers going down, but if the numbers, indeed, start going up again, would you put this lockdown in place again?

PM: You recall that when I set out the alert level system, that is a mechanism to help us get under control, when we see cases starting to rise, to bring them back down. If we all cooperate together, the goal is to bring them down and get back into a level where we can start returning to some more normality in our lives, but it will take a concerted effort over these next four weeks, and rigorous monitoring of what happens with transmission.

Media: What's changed between Saturday and today, because, obviously, it was just level two on Saturday?

PM: Yes, and as you will have heard from the Director-General, we at that time were still investigating some of those individual cases to ascertain community transmission or not. We're now of the view that it is confirmed, and that means we need to move and move quickly. What we've done today is set out level three, but a transition into level four. That is so people can get their lives in order. I understand what I'm asking of them is significant, but, please, we've been signalling for some time the potential for us to continue for us to have to move into more extraordinary measures. And I ask New Zealanders, that as we move through this next phase, to do it in an orderly way. You will continue to have access to essential services for as long as we are in level four: supermarkets, doctors, your pharmaceutical products. Do not panic buy. That deprives others who need products from being able to access them.

Media: Prime Minister, for a lot of people, self-isolation will mean that they, you know, are much on their own. Is this appropriate, do you think, for those people to be able to nominate one other person who they can go for a walk with or something so that they are not completely isolated?

PM: Yes—yeah. So in those cases, my simple message again is that if you are staying in contact with only the same people for the entire time. So there may be essential workers in our workforce who, for instance, have two parents who may be doctors or nurses. So long as the people that are caring and providing support are, a) not elderly and vulnerable but maintaining the same contact and no one else—it's that constant movement and iterations of different people. So consistency is key and making sure that it remains that very small, small limited contact.

Media: How easy will it be for the New Zealand public to be tested?

PM: Well, testing, obviously, is already at rates that are comparable to, for instance, Korea that is being held up at gold-standard level. We've also had every DHB provide specific testing stations, and those are already in place. So that will continue while we go through this period. People who believe they need to be tested and either contact their GP via phone or Healthline will be directed to those testing facilities. If there is not one in close proximity, then alternative arrangements are made for them.

Media: How will it be enforced?

PM: Enforcement will be through some of those powers that we use under epidemic notices and through being in a national civil defence emergency. Our police officers, obviously, will be part of our enforcement regime and, of course, we hope not to have to use them, but there will be a strict enforcement of these requirements.

Media: Is the Government considering a universal basic income going forward?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, look, as I said, Jason, we're looking to protect the incomes of New Zealanders while we're in alert level four. That work is urgently under way now, and I'll come back and talk about that within the next couple of days. We do need to make sure that we are securing New Zealanders' income during this period, but I think I'll leave any further detail about that till we've finalised that work.

Media: Just a follow-up to that earlier question about enforcement. Will the military be involved? What will the police presence look like on the streets? And what can people expect if they're flouting the rules?

PM: Yeah, and we of course want New Zealanders to see that these measures are being enforced but in a way that we're used to seeing as New Zealanders. I can understand that seeing an increase in presence by police and our military, you know, may not be what we're used to in New Zealand, but they will be working together. So I'll allow Police Commissioner Bush to speak more to some of the operational side when he speaks to you this afternoon. But I'm advised they have all of the enforcement powers they need. We are utilising now the Public Health Act. I will be issuing an epidemic notice, which gives, of course, us a range of additional powers to move into the status we're talking about at level four, and, of course, also, we will be in a national civil defence emergency.

Media: Yeah could you please provide some information round the criteria around the bank loan guarantee scheme?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, look, I will do that, Jenèe, in the coming days. We are literally in the middle of the finalisation of those negotiations now, but you can look to Australia for the template for what we have been working on with the banks. We want to make sure that's appropriate to New Zealand both in terms of the level of it, the way that we do risk sharing within it between the Crown and banks. So all of those details are being nussed out right now, and as soon as I've got that finalised, it'll be announced.

Media: You've painted a fairly grim picture of what might be possible for New Zealand and admitted that many New Zealanders will be scared. Are you scared?

PM: No, because we have a plan, and so that's my message to New Zealanders: we have a window that we are utilising in a way that some countries did not, and so we have the opportunity to make sure that we're not like other places. Now, because of the natural trajectory and the lag time of COVID, there will be a period where we will see cases continue to rise, but I ask New Zealanders that while we're in that four-week period, our hope is that we see that then start turning around. But no, I am not—I am not afraid, because we have a plan. We've listened to the science. We are moving early, and I just ask New Zealanders now to come with us on what will be an extraordinary period of time for everyone.

Media: Could some regions be lifted out of level four before that four weeks is over, or will it be level four for the entire nation?

PM: The advice I've had is that we need to remain in level four as a nation, but then we may be in a period where some regions come out of level four before others. But, of course, again, compliance will be key. What we get from the testing and the intelligence from the testing will tell us whether that will be possible.

Media: Will you explain to people what you mean by essential services, for people watching? They'll still, obviously, be able to go to the supermarket. Can you outline that for us?

PM: Yes. So, essentially, those who are part of the food supply chain—so who are providing our supermarkets; who are, for instance, part of our essential primary industries. So we've already been talking with Fonterra. They've been making preparations for level three and level four. Likewise, I had quick contact with the Federated Farmers today. So things like supply chain for food; temporarily, education falls in—temporarily. We will have essential services for building and construction. So, for instance, if a water main breaks at a hospital or if we are completing building works on a hospital, those essential services will continue, but they will have requirements around how they operate. There will be those, obviously, from within the Public Service: those within MSD who are continuing payments, those who are ensuring we are safe—the police—those, obviously, within healthcare and defence. We have a list of essential services that have been provided to Cabinet and will be made available later on this afternoon, perhaps talking to John Ombler and Commissioner Bush will walk you through some of that.

Media: Will there be any roadblocks—will people be cut off?

PM: No. So, essentially, what I, again, am advising is that we expect people to, essentially, act in a solitary way locally. Look, you may choose to drive for a walk to your local beach, but we are asking people to stay local, because they will be continuing to congregate just within their own family and whānau. But we are applying this across New Zealand, and so some areas in other parts of the world have used roadblocks to stop people moving into different quarantine areas, but the whole country will be in self-isolation.

Media: Just logistically, your business support package has jumped from about \$12.1 billion to 16.3. Where is that money coming from, given the fact that you've indicated that more support will be coming?

Hon Grant Robertson: Where is it coming from? Well, as you know, Jason, we have to borrow this money. We're not reprioritising money; this is additional funding and support that is required to meet the needs of New Zealanders.

Media: Prime Minister, will you be returning to Auckland to be based there, and will Parliament continue in any form over the next four weeks?

PM: The Leader of the House will speak a little bit to that when he speaks with you with his Minister of Education hat on. I'll give you a very quick overview though. No, my intention is to be based here. This enables me to be as close as I can for those who are helping to run the operation from central government over the coming weeks. My contact with others will be very limited. We're currently working through protocols for how I can continue to convey information and be questioned by the media, so we can keep up those accountabilities, but those are things we'll work through over the next 48 hours. I anticipate that I will only really be present here in this building and the building in which I live. When it comes to other Ministers, they have been told to work from home, in the same way that other New Zealanders are expected to, and I expect that that will be the case unless there is some extraordinarily exceptional circumstances.

For Parliament: before I came down, I had a very brief conversation with the Leader of the Opposition. I conveyed to him the decisions that are being relayed here today, and I don't think he'll mind me saying that he was supportive of that. I have mentioned to him that there are some elements that require the scrutiny of Parliament—the epidemic notice; civil defence powers—and we will work through how we can do that in a way that is responsible and aligns with what we have set out here today. But otherwise, I'm asking the Business Committee and all of Parliament to work through what that will look like for Parliament going forward. I will just set out one more element. I've proposed what I could loosely describe as a select committee of some sorts to allow a scrutiny function to the Government over this period of time. I absolutely accept that this is an extraordinary time. I want to give the public confidence that there will still be accountability and we will be enabling the Opposition to play that role; I just need to work through the details of how that will work remotely.

Media: The prospect of a grand coalition—is that on the cards?

PM: No. Look, as I've set out, my expectation is that we provide that role for the Opposition to be kept up to date, to make sure that they are able to apply their role as those who are to hold us to account through a different form while we are in this remote situation. But I'll work through with them directly what that looks like, as I will with other parties.

Media: Will your moves today have—I know you've been asked about this before, but just to reiterate: have your moves today had any effect on the election date?

PM: No, not at this stage. But, as you can imagine, of course we take everything into account as we're moving through, but, at this stage, obviously, my immediate focus is what's happening in the next four to eight weeks, rather than that far down the track.

Media: Are media companies essential services?

PM: Yes. So we have included media as essential—news and broadcast media as essential—services. We will just need to make sure we work through how that can be operationalised in a way that keeps all of you safe, as well.

Media: Prime Minister, how does it feel delivering this news?

PM: Oh, I have a very keen sense of the magnitude of this moment in New Zealand's history, and we did not take this decision lightly. As we concluded Cabinet today, we were equally in the extraordinary position of having split into two groups so that we could maintain social distance from one another, and we all knew the magnitude of what we were doing, but we all absolutely believe this is the right thing to do. We will save lives by taking these measures now, and, ultimately, we are taking them before many, many other countries did, and I hope that means we will not pay the price that others have paid.

Media: With the business package extension, Minister Robertson—does that still have the specific time limit on it, and is the 9 billion [*Inaudible*]

Hon Grant Robertson: Six-week—12 weeks.

Media: —time limit on it, and is the \$9 billion a strict cut-off?

Hon Grant Robertson: No, it's not. It's, again, our estimate. The discussion that you and I were having last week about exactly where that would be—that is the estimate that we've made. But, again, it does not have an actual non-monetary cap on it. Yes, it is for 12 weeks. Obviously, we will review that as we go, and, as I said, we're very acutely aware of the fact that as we move into level four, the effects on the New Zealand economy and on businesses and employees heightens. That's why I said we are removing urgently to further initiatives, which we'll announce in the coming days.

Media: A couple of things Australia did overnight were raise benefits over a six-month period by \$225. Did you consider that, and are you considering letting people access their KiwiSaver early to draw down on their savings?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, but we're keeping all options on the table. Obviously, we did increase benefits ourselves last week—not to the extent the Australian ones went up overnight, but we did increase them—and, in terms of options like KiwiSaver, we have to keep everything on the table, given the extraordinary times we're in. I think you'll see that what we've announced today provides further support and certainty, but, obviously, as alert level four evolves and we understand more about how long we're going to be in it, we will need to make further decisions.

Media: How many businesses do you think we're going to lose?

Hon Grant Robertson: I don't—I can't answer that question, Jenna, and I don't think anyone could. What we've done today is cushion the blow of this COVID-19 epidemic on New Zealanders, but I said last Tuesday we can't save every job and we can't save every business. What we've done today is extend our support, and we're doing our very, very best to keep New Zealanders in work and to keep businesses going.

PM: And—

Hon Grant Robertson: Can I just reiterate—sorry, Prime Minister. I just reiterate, over the next 48 hours, I really encourage employers and employees to get together and talk, make a plan, and work out how they can get through this with the support that we're offering.

PM: One final point I think that's worth making is that in making this decision now, of course our hope is that we can see that movement in transmission—that our testing will tell us what's happening in our communities so we have a greater chance of spending a shorter time as possible in isolation. Overnight, of course, you will have seen Spain has already had to extend their period, and so by moving early, we are in a better position to be in it for a shorter time than if we wait, and, equally, we save lives along that too.

Hon Grant Robertson: Just to add too on that is that this move, I believe, has the support of almost the entire business community. Certainly the conversations I've been having in the last 24 to 48 hours would indicate that people understand that taking this action now means not only that we save lives; it also means that when we can come out the other end of this, we can have an economy that will function well.

Media: Just on the modelling that shows that without these measures tens of thousands of New Zealanders could die, who was that provided by and will you make it public?

PM: So there's been multiple estimates—all of them, essentially, make assumptions about transmission rate, they make assumptions about the level of transmission through contact with others, and, ultimately, they all have a range of assumptions in them. So none of us give us anything that is definitive; what we do know, though, is that unless we take

measures like this, it will be tens of thousands. I expect that we'll be making the advice that we've received publicly available in the same way we do with other papers that we receive.

Media: Can you tell us why it is, in general terms, that you need to provide working capital for so many companies?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, clearly, the impact of this has now spread right across the whole economy, so we've moved from, perhaps, a sector by sector focus, which people had even just a couple of weeks ago in terms of tourism, to an acknowledgment that the measures we've taken today, which clearly will have a significant impact on business, but more than that the many months that we have to come of managing this virus, and so we want to maximise the number of people who can continue to employ their staff, keep their business going. I'm still not promising that we can save every job or every business, but we are cushioning the blow.

Media: But are they—are major companies warning that, as it stands, they're insolvent?

Hon Grant Robertson: Different companies are in different positions, Hamish. We certainly are aware that some large companies in New Zealand are concerned, but we are working with them and continue to work with them on a case by case basis, but what we have done today with the scheme is give certainty to every business in New Zealand that they are eligible for that wage subsidy scheme.

PM: I think this is acknowledgement that the decision taken by Cabinet today is extraordinary and that it will have extraordinary impacts, and so we wanted to make sure we had made these decisions and were able to give that level of certainty in a highly uncertain time to the business community and to those who employ our workforce. So the wage subsidy and the additional announcements made by the Minister are all about providing that alongside these other significant decisions. I'll take just two more questions; then I'm going to hand over to Minister Hipkins. I will be available for you again down the track as we start this transition. I'll be working through details of that with your team. I'll take Jo and then I'll take Jenna and then we'll wrap.

Media: Just in terms of people's mental health with this announcement today, what has been done to ensure that there is enough support in place for people?

PM: A very good question. The Ministry of Health has already been working through some of those issues, and I expect to say more on that as we move. Some of this will be iterative, and we will be building capacity and support and initiatives as we go as well. Government will not shut down for those essential services and those essential needs. We of course still have the 1737 line, but I'm interested in thinking about how we can utilise other Government call centres and networks to deal with what will actually be, for many, just that feeling of isolation and lack of contact. But, in the meantime, while we work through a Government response, I say to the public: go and check in on your neighbours, get contact details of those who live in your street or in your building, start a phone tree of contact, think about small things that you can do to maintain that contact without being face to face, because that will be one of the greatest hurdles we have to overcome is looking after each other from behind closed doors. OK, Jenna.

Media: Part of the business continuity package was the expectation on employers to keep a certain amount of people employed for a certain number of days a week—obviously, with many businesses having to close their doors with level four. Will that expectation still be [*Inaudible*], and how do you assure it's getting to the workers?

Hon Grant Robertson: The "best endeavours" expectation remains. And also people are signing a declaration to say that the money will be being passed through to workers. And, again, I have faith in New Zealand businesses. Most New Zealand businesses think of their workers as family, and they're going to look after them through this period. So we are relying on that declaration. That's what's enabled us to get money out the door so quickly.

Media: If people are self-isolating and businesses are closed, how are they going to keep, say retail workers for example, employed for four days of the week?

PM: Well, that's where we expect payroll to continue to be passing on those wage subsidies. And we have mechanisms that we've put in place, if needed, where employees will be able to check whether or not, for instance, their employers have accessed wage subsidies that should be passed on to them. The requirement for the threshold of work doesn't apply in a period where everyone is required to be at home.

Hon Grant Robertson: And, as I said, we will continue to look at further measures as well.

PM: All right. Thanks, everyone. I'll be back with you again sometime in the near future.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Kia ora, everybody. As the Prime Minister has already announced, schools and early childhood services will close from tomorrow, except for the children of identified essential workers. Work is under way to prepare for online learning in all educational settings where that is appropriate and where that can be delivered consistent with the self-isolation requirements that have been set out. Tertiary institutions will close as soon as possible. Funding for all education providers will continue to flow as normal. Funding for early childhood and tertiary providers will not be cut or clawed back based on non-attendance or failure to meet key performance indicators. It's important that the sector have that knowledge that the money will continue to arrive. All schools and early childhood services will be closed from midnight on Wednesday, although distance learning, as I've said, may continue to be provided where it can be done consistent with self-isolation.

Turning to the other part of the role that I'm here to talk to you about, Parliament's Business Committee will meet tomorrow via teleconference, and the Speaker has been asked to recall Parliament on Wednesday. Attendance requirements for Parliament on Wednesday will be determined by the Business Committee when it meets via teleconference tomorrow. I do envisage it will be a small number of members of Parliament who are in attendance tomorrow, and parties will be asked not to have MPs travelling to Wellington for Parliament meeting unless absolutely vital.

The main items of business that Parliament will consider are receiving the epidemic notice that the Prime Minister will be issuing this afternoon. There's a legal requirement for Parliament to receive that. Parliament will look to pass an imprest supply bill in order to allow the Government funding to continue to flow. A motion to suspend all non-essential parliamentary business will need to be passed. That includes suspending all of the business that's currently before select committees. And an accountability mechanism will be established to allow the Opposition and backbench MPs as necessary to continue to do their job of questioning the Government, of holding the Government to account when Parliament is not able to meet.

At this point, Parliament will adjourn. No fixed date for Parliament to meet again will be set at this point. We will, obviously, recall Parliament—or ask the Speaker to recall Parliament—when it's appropriate to do so. Any questions?

Media: Do you think the election will be delayed?

Hon Chris Hipkins: That's not my decision. That's one for the Prime Minister.

Media: How will schools manage [*Inaudible*] services for children? What will happen to them from midnight?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So we are going to be asking, over the next 48 hours, for goodwill from our schools and early learning institutions. My first piece of advice, or my first request to them, is that any vulnerable workers are asked to stay home immediately. Many schools and early learning services will have done that already based on the decisions that were announced over the weekend. We are asking for goodwill to continue to supply support to those families that need that over the next 48 hours, while they make other arrangements. That's why, for that essential workforce, it is important that schools and early learning services continue to provide that support.

Media: So schools will have an idea of who exactly will and will not be coming to school?

Hon Chris Hipkins: That's right, so the list of essential workforces is being issued and it will be provided to schools, and schools will communicate that to parents so that parents know who can and can't send their kids to school tomorrow and on Wednesday. The nature of the school day, or the early childhood centre's day, obviously will change significantly for Tuesday and Wednesday, because I imagine they won't be running their regular timetabled classes; they'll be doing something alternative, almost certainly, and we'll be asking them, of course, as much as possible, to be, within the school environment, observing the social distancing requirements. That'll be easier for them with a lot fewer students in the classrooms.

Media: What does it mean for students that might be hoping to attain certain levels of schooling this year? Is it just in the Never Never or?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, at this point, that's something that we'll be continuing to assess depending on how long it is that we have kids away from school for. At this point, bringing forward the school holidays—which is two weeks that kids wouldn't have been in school anyway—helps. And then, obviously, we can, depending on how long kids are away from school for, how much distance learning can be done—then we can reassess things as the year progresses.

Media: Is there a realistic prospect that people will need to repeat their school year next year?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, I think that's premature at this point—it's premature at this point. Obviously, at the moment, our key focus is on preparing to wind the schooling and early childhood and tertiary systems down for a period of time to the point where they will be closed for the duration of the level four. As we look to come out the other end of that, then, obviously, we'll be reassessing and we'll be preparing. We're also working very hard to scale up the online learning opportunities that are available, including looking at the equity issues around that. We reckon that there's about 20 percent of kids where there are some equity concerns—whether they don't have broadband at home or they don't have devices. So we're looking at how quickly we could deal with those equity issues so that, if we do end up in a period where kids need to be learning from home for longer, then we can make sure we can respond to that as quickly as we can.

Media: How big of a problem is that equity issue?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, that really depends how long this situation continues for. We know that a number of schools can start online learning fairly quickly: their kids have devices, the families have broadband at home, they've got the platforms to deliver online learning relatively easily. We've had a lot of offers from those schools that have that capability who are offering to collaborate and share with the schools that don't. That's a really positive development, and we'll be, you know, over the next few weeks, looking to build on that as much as we can. In terms of the equity at home, making sure we've got broadband supplied in households where kids are at home, that's something we're working very closely with the telecommunications companies about; we've been working on that for a couple of weeks now. And then, obviously, there's the issue of the physical devices themselves, and the supply of devices, of course, will come into play here, but we'll be working very hard to make sure that as much as possible we overcome those equity issues.

Media: What about children with learning difficulties, how will you cater to them?

Hon Chris Hipkins: My advice to families who have children who have learning difficulties is to continue talking to their schools, to continue talking to the health services who support them. Obviously, families have those kids at home for a lot of the time anyway, so they will have those arrangements in place. This is going to be difficult. Obviously, we will work as much as we can with those families to smooth things as much as we can.

Media: So when you say you're bringing forward the holidays two weeks, that doesn't mean school's going back in two weeks; they'll still be off for the full four-week period?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, what it means is that, during that four-week period, two weeks of that will be what would've otherwise been school holiday time. So it's actually a matter of minimising the amount of time that schools otherwise would have been open that's included in this window.

Media: So the whole four weeks will be, effectively, school holidays?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, students won't be at school during that time, and schools will be closed. But we're not going to then get to the end of four weeks and then have two weeks of school holidays, I guess that's the point that I'm making.

Media: Back on Parliament. What is your hope for Parliament after Wednesday's extraordinary session?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, I've been talking to the Opposition, I've been speaking to Gerry Brownlee, the Prime Minister's been speaking to the Leader of the Opposition, Simon Bridges; there is a lot of goodwill here. There's a recognition that we need to behave responsibly, we need to act with urgency to ensure that Parliament can do what it absolutely needs to do, but that also we need to lead by example, and that, in fact, you know, members of Parliament themselves will be staying home, we will also be in self-isolation, same as the rest of the country, and I think there is goodwill across the House to make sure that we are living up to the expectations we set of others.

Media: What happens if there's any urgent legislation that needs to go through Parliament that requires MPs to be in the House? If Parliament's been adjourned, how are you going to make the legislative decision to get it through?

Hon Chris Hipkins: If we absolutely have to, we, of course, have the ability to recall Parliament again and, through the same mechanism that we will use tomorrow, we can severely restrict the attendance at Parliament down to those who absolutely have to be there. The advice that I've had so far is that most of the foreseeable things that we may encounter over this four-week period can be dealt with without having to bring Parliament back, but, of course, it is there as an option if absolutely essential. We will avoid that if at all possible, as much as possible, because we want people to be staying home—and that includes members of Parliament.

Media: Is most legislation basically on ice?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes, all of the Government's regular legislative programme is now on hold. Select committees will be on hold; the report-back deadlines that select committees work to will all be pushed out so that there are no pressing deadlines that have to be met. That will all be able to happen on Wednesday.

Media: So it's plausible, it's possible that this Parliament won't meet again after Wednesday?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Certainly not for at least that four-week period, unless absolutely critical. OK, thank you everybody.

conclusion of press conference