

PRESS CONFERENCE: THURSDAY, 2 APRIL 2020

PM: Afternoon, everyone. Today, I can give you an update on the reach of Government investment that, at this stage, aims to ensure people remain connected to their jobs and have an income so businesses can come through the impacts of COVID-19 and keep going.

The wage subsidy has seen \$4.5 billion paid out, helping just over 750,000 New Zealanders, 115,000 of which are self-employed. And to shine a light on the current daily scale, there were 13,300 new applications since yesterday, and they continue to be processed in earnest by MSD staff.

Today, I can also confirm that we've agreed a leave scheme for essential workers. This is for those essential businesses that are experiencing significant loss of business or similar hardship. There are people working in our essential services who are more vulnerable to COVID-19, such as those over 70 or with compromised immunity, and workers who have vulnerable people at home. We need to ensure that they have the ability to take leave and are not feeling pressured to come to work if they're vulnerable, sick, or otherwise unable to work. This also applies to those on essential service front lines that contract the virus and need to take leave as a result.

The leave scheme allows businesses to pay those workers who need to take leave at the same rate as the wage subsidy scheme of \$585.80 per week full time and \$350 per week for part-time workers. Usual conditions apply, such as an employer paying the usual income if it's less than the relevant subsidy, or, if it's more, the employer aiming to pay at least 80 percent of the worker's usual income. The scheme will be open and available from next Monday. Minister Robertson is here to answer any questions on that scheme, but you will recall, as many of you have asked questions about this issue, this is to ensure that any essential or front-line workers who are vulnerable are now supported to be at home, and that their employers—we continue to have that expectation that they be able to remain at home.

Today, I can also share decisions made by the COVID committee. The Deputy Prime Minister has been leading work on the repatriation of foreign nationals. As he has said this afternoon, when we moved into lockdown a week ago, we rightly prioritised public health and limited the movement of people so as to restrict the spread of COVID-19. But it is clear that many foreign nationals travelling here do not have the resources or capability to adequately self-isolate, and wish to return home. The week that we've had in this first week of lockdown has given us the space and capacity to draw up a plan to enable, as seamless as possible, the movement of foreign nationals in order for them to exit New Zealand.

Under the managed exit plan, foreign nationals returning home will be considered to be engaging in essential travel and, therefore, able to travel domestically whether by air or land when they have a confirmed or scheduled international flight out of New Zealand. We have some specific requirements there that sit alongside that; that's all available on the COVID-19 website, but in particular someone who's travelling on a domestic flight must have a ticketed international flight within a 24-hour window so that we can be assured they are travelling to get to an international airport in order to leave New Zealand.

Foreign Governments will be allowed to organise charter flights to repatriate their citizens, but only if they can satisfy New Zealand health requirements. I expect that, as a result of these changes and this part of our now managed exit plan, we will see people beginning to move fairly shortly. For those who are relying on commercial options, which do still exist—and there continues to be a Qatar flight going daily, I believe, and more so than that soon, out of Doha—those commercial options are there and are available, and we have not put a time limit on people's ability to engage in essential travel for domestic links. So I want to assure foreign nationals that they will have the time to make a plan, make a safe plan, for themselves to utilise those commercial options.

Today, a New Zealand Government WhatsApp channel for COVID-19 has kicked off. The current functions include latest updates and news, latest case information, symptoms, financial support available, and mental health advice. It's been led by the health Minister, David Clark, and was developed with help from the private sector, including Rob Fyfe and Sam Morgan.

For those interested, rather than being an app, it utilises WhatsApp, given that so many New Zealanders already have this function on their phone. So, once you have WhatsApp on your phone, if you simply open your browser, type in [covid19.govt.nz/whatsapp](https://www.covid19.govt.nz/whatsapp), it will give you the option of sending yourself a link that will then open in your existing WhatsApp app and you'll have the latest COVID-19 information right there directly on your phone. And you'll see that it includes the latest case information for today and will do so on a rolling basis. The view is that, once we have people using that function on their device, they will then build in additional functionality and, in the future, may be able to help us as we continue our ongoing fight against COVID-19.

Finally, today I want to extend a thankyou to those whose job it is to keep our communities safe. Our police workforce of nearly 14,000, more than 10,000 of which are police officers, in alert level 4, their approach is educate, warn, enforce, but what we've seen most is assistance. I've heard that, in Rotorua, on Monday, for example, a local gentleman who is homeless who usually rebuffs police help accepted fresh food, clothing, and isolation accommodation. He was supported then to set up a doctor's check-up as he hadn't been in a long time, all with the help of local police. In Northland this week, a police shift staff member advised an elderly man in a supermarket that he should be at home as he was vulnerable to COVID-19. The man told him he had no one to shop for him; so the staff member asked for his address, did the shop, and dropped it to his front door. We know, too, that police, as they keep us safe, are facing challenges themselves, as they do every day, but they continue to go above and beyond, and for that I want to say thank you to all of them.

Finally, I want to acknowledge Police Commissioner Mike Bush, who finishes up at midnight tonight, handing the reins over to Andrew Coster. Mike will stay on in the all-of-Government COVID-19 response group and will be working closely with our new Police Commissioner. Mike Bush has been an exceptional police officer and civil servant and, as Commissioner, has led the front-line response to some enormous and extraordinary challenges. He leaves the role with a police force that continues to change and adapt and meets the needs of the people it serves. So now is not really farewell for Mike given he will continue to be part of the operational response to COVID-19, but in his role as Police Commissioner, for now, he signs off, and we say thank you.

Happy to take questions—and, obviously, Minister Robertson is here also.

Media: Why doesn't the Government buy the Bauer titles and save them?

PM: I have to say, I'm extraordinarily disappointed and, frankly, gutted to see what has been a part of New Zealand history close its doors fairly abruptly today. What I want to make really clear, though, is that the Government actively sought to assist Bauer through this period of time. Minister Kris Faafoi spoke to them and asked if they could take up the wage subsidy; they refused. In my view, from what I know of this situation, this appears to have been a decision that has been made that is at the same time as COVID-19 but not because of it.

Media: But the wage subsidy wouldn't have even touched the sides with the ad revenue flat-lining. So why not buy the titles and save the titles, even in a caretaker role?

PM: Well, ultimately, the issues around advertising revenue and so on are a long-term issue that has been exacerbated by revenue going, for instance, to online media, social media, and so on. The wage subsidy could, and should, have made a difference to those staff, to those writers, to those journalists, and we were very keen that Bauer take it up. Many other businesses have done the same. They've seen it as an opportunity to keep

their staff on. We would've liked to have seen Bauer do that too—keep their doors open, keep operating, keep an online offering, and move through the other side of COVID-19 once we're all able to.

Media: What countries have shown an interest in repatriating their citizens back home?

PM: Yeah, so we know that we have a large number at the moment from Germany, from the UK, in particular, but, actually, there's a number from a range of different countries, and quite large numbers as well. That's why you've seen interest from the likes of Germany to charter specific flights, just because of the sheer number of German nationals that are currently in New Zealand. And I know that New Zealanders will want all of those individuals to know how seriously we take our hospitality, and these are extraordinary circumstances where it just hasn't been possible for us to give any of those individuals the usual hospitality we would want. And so now we're supporting them to get home.

Media: Prime Minister, should people be able to self-isolate when they arrive at the border? Is it time now for everyone to be quarantined when they arrive here in New Zealand, given the police are saying they haven't been able to physically check people like was promised?

PM: Two things first of all. We are relying on every New Zealander to self-isolate. We are relying on those who have come in contact with COVID cases to self-isolate. We're relying on those who are vulnerable to self-isolate. And so there is a level of faith that we have to have in everyone, and I would remind people again that, yes, there is risk from those coming in from overseas but so too is there risk from people who are part of community clusters and outbreaks at the moment. So there—in all of this response, we are relying on people.

But we have put in extra measures when it comes to the border. Already, I'm told by the Police that they have had 5,984 contacts with individual passengers via the geolocation system that Commissioner Bush talked about today at select committee. Now, if someone does not respond to that, then they are getting a follow-up from the police. So we are policing that process, but there is a level of reliance on every New Zealander to play their part here.

Media: This is important for the homeless group—that there is a point at which, at the border, the Government knows where they are and could—

PM: Yeah. Keeping in mind—

Media: And with numbers reducing now—maybe two weeks ago—

PM: Keeping in mind that we are doing a risk assessment, and so anyone who is symptomatic is quarantined—not just put into a hotel but quarantined. Anyone who doesn't have a self-isolation plan—and let me explain what that means. If they, for instance, will be self-isolating with anyone who is vulnerable, if they don't have an adequate way to get to their self-isolation that doesn't put others at risk, then they will be put into, essentially, a hotel and monitored by us. There are over a thousand people we have done that to. So we are risk assessing. But if, for instance, someone has a private vehicle to go home to, they're isolating just with the person they travelled with, for instance, and they live 20 minutes from an airport, yes, they go home; we check on them; if we don't hear back, the police go and knock on their door.

Media: Can we ask of police, though, given everything else that they're being asked to do in terms of enforcement, to so actively and directly monitor this big group? There are 4,000 people at the moment.

PM: But, keeping in mind, if they were all in hotels, we would be doing exactly the same thing—and not only for police but also for public health officials. So it is a use of resource no matter what way you look at it. What we're doing at the moment is making sure we're channelling that resource into our highest-risk individuals. One thing also to keep in mind: we have had a large number of New Zealanders coming back. That is starting to trail

away. So we're continuing to assess every day the numbers coming in, and we are willing to change our approach based on what we see. So we'll keep monitoring that, keep seeing what's possible, but, as I say, we've continued to step up what we're doing at the border.

Media: Did Commissioner Bush actually explain to you how that geotracking works and whether it's just that one check in with one text message at the start or whether they can track them for the entire two weeks?

PM: As I've had it explained to me, that, of course, it's a voluntary opt-in basis—that once someone accepts that, then they are able to track whether or not someone is staying in the vicinity of where they've said that they will be. That's my understanding of what they have operationalised. Again, it is voluntary, and I think that's a really important point to make here. This is a technological fix that hasn't really been used in New Zealand to date, but it's the kind of tool a lot of overseas countries are starting to use as we think about how do we make sure that we can adequately contact trace who people are in contact with. So these are the kinds of tools that countries are looking at.

Media: Are police going and knocking on doors for every single person that does not consent to do that texting measure?

PM: So that currently is their plan. As it's been outlined to me, though, the numbers look like a large number of people have been opting in.

Media: Prime Minister, is there a Plan B? If the lockdown doesn't work and we do see mass transmission, does the Government have some other contingency plan to use?

PM: Looking around the world, of course all social distancing and levels of self-isolation, when properly applied by the public, have an impact, and so I haven't seen anywhere where there hasn't been a country that has opted into these kinds of options as New Zealand has—not as early as New Zealand has—but as New Zealand has where we haven't seen an impact on transmission.

Media: What other plans, say keeping over-60s home but letting the rest of the economy—

PM: Well, they're already built into the different alert systems. There are, of course, things that we need to do as a matter of course, no matter what alert system we're at—for instance, the ongoing public health campaign, the basics of making sure that we're all washing our hands, that we've got cough and sneeze etiquettes—into our elbows. All of that needs to be consistent throughout every single level, and then, of course, we have different asks of people depending on where we are at in terms of our cases and transmission.

Media: Outside of those alert levels, it's basically stay in level 4 as long as needed?

PM: Sorry?

Media: It's basically stay in level 4 as long as needed?

PM: Well, ultimately, though, of course, we'll have indicators on the success that we've had within level 4 in the time frame that we've been in it.

Media: Are you able to be clear what those triggers will be, to—

PM: Yeah, I've given some indication before. I think probably what some people are asking for is things like, "Can you tell us a specific number we need to hit?" That's just not the way that the science is going to tell us what to do, necessarily. At level 4, of course, what we're looking at are signs that we have transmission back under control. So we'll be building in thinking around the number of cases we have, also the level of community transmission, what's happening with our clusters. So it'll be multiple factors. We'll also be looking at regions. Do we have outbreaks in certain regions that aren't in control? Level 4 is all about wresting back that control, making sure that we are back on track for, ultimately, stamping out COVID-19. I will bring more detail over time, though.

Media: Prime Minister, 37 people have tested positive for COVID-19 in Matamata. Are you concerned for the impact it would have, given it's such a small community?

PM: Yeah, I know that community very, very well. It's neighbouring my old home town and is very similar in many, many ways; so I feel like I have a bit of an insight into the impact it will be having and the fact that everyone will know someone affected in the town. I think what it goes to prove is just the importance of that guidance on things like mass gatherings. So this is transmission that's happened at a local bar, and it also demonstrates why being at level 4 now will help us to continue to contain that transmission. Imagine right now if we had that cluster, that outbreak, without us all being in self-isolation and what that would mean in terms of those numbers, with one person transmitting and passing it on to three, maybe as many as five people. That is how you see the kinds of outbreaks that we've seen in other countries.

Media: Prime Minister, we've heard about Kiwis stuck overseas—for example, an elderly couple that's been stuck in New Delhi for the last two weeks without a flight home. What's the Government doing now in regards to mercy flights?

PM: In some cases, of course, you've already heard me talk about the ongoing commercial options, and with Qatar now saying that they're looking to increase their flights, through Doha, out of Europe, then that provides an additional option. But, from what I've seen, those flights have not been full already, and so that tells me that many New Zealanders are choosing to shelter in place. What we will do is, where there are chartered flights, if we know that we have New Zealanders in an area where there is a charter flight being used, we'll look into whether or not it's viable, or possible, for those New Zealanders to perhaps access those chartered flights—keeping in mind that will mean us working closely with the Government who's accessing them in the first place. A good example, though, you've raised is a small number of New Zealanders in one place, and that's the struggle we have. Many countries have thousands of foreign nationals, as Germany does in New Zealand, but we tend to have smaller numbers scattered over a large number of areas, and that's where MFAT is trying to provide assistance and advice where we can.

Media: Prime Minister, will Cabinet continue to use Zoom?

PM: Ultimately, I rely on the advice of our security and intelligence agencies, and so I'll check—and I see questions have been asked about it. I will check in again. If the GCSB tells us we should not use Zoom, we will not use Zoom. Two things to add: we've only used it once, and I can also tell you that, predominantly, the subject matters that we have discussed I have immediately come down and shared here in this room. And so we've been pretty cautious on the kinds of things that we're discussing, and we've also been very transparent around the decisions that we've made.

Media: Zoom has admitted that its calls aren't end-to-end encrypted and that Zoom employees can actually access the meeting's content. So, even if you're discussing the things that you come down here and then tell us about, you're doing it at a higher level, aren't you?

PM: And, again, I am here ultimately saying that I will follow the advice that we have from the GCSB. We have predominantly till now used teleconference facilities. We've used, for Cabinet, Zoom on one occasion for subject matters that we've openly shared here. If I am told we shouldn't use it, we won't. It's as simple as that.

Media: Could the GCSB have been remiss and perhaps not recognised that it wasn't end-to-end encrypted?

PM: Look, ultimately I think they probably gave us the advice that was based on the subject matter that we were discussing. They've told us that it is not something we should discuss anything above restricted, and we haven't. So we've been judicious in the kinds of things that we're utilising Zoom for.

Media: [*Inaudible*] at that high level as well?

PM: Yep, ultimately, on this occasion, it wasn't. Not every subject matter that we discuss is at restricted and above. But, of course, we have used teleconference facilities in the past, and they're still open to us. So if it's not safe, we won't use it. Jason, go ahead; I'm worried that Minister Robertson's feeling lonely.

Hon Grant Robertson: It's fine.

Media: I was just wondering if you could go into a little bit more detail about the Government's plan for some of the larger—and maybe some of the smaller—media companies in New Zealand, given Bauer this morning saying they are closing their doors.

Hon Grant Robertson: As I said yesterday, we understand the importance of a plurality of media in New Zealand. We're well served by Radio New Zealand and by TV New Zealand, but that can't be the end of the road when it comes to media in a society like New Zealand. So we are mindful of that. Minister Faafoi has been talking on a regular basis to the media organisations in New Zealand about where they are. As the Prime Minister's outlined already, what we've seen with Bauer, I think, is a quite different set of circumstances here around some pre-existing views and conditions, and a failure to take up the Government's offer of assistance. But, more broadly, we want to make sure that we can support a thriving media in New Zealand, and will continue to work on that.

PM: I'm going to just add a little something here because I think some of the reporting I've seen I just find incredibly unfair. No one wanted to see the loss of these magazines. These have all been part of New Zealand's history—they've been part of people's lives. Within a couple of days of the New Zealand Government announcing the lockdown, Bauer contacted the Minister and told him they weren't interested in subsidies. They didn't enter a conversation about becoming an essential service, they didn't seek to continue to operate in lockdown, and they didn't want to use the Government support to keep their doors open. So I just reject any suggestion that COVID-19 and our response to it has caused them to shut their printing press, but I deeply regret that they have. In my view, they should have taken it up and they should have kept going.

Media: You're looking at a broader media package, aren't you? So clearly the need for that is now.

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, the need is—I mean, as I think I said again yesterday, our timescales shrink every day. So, yes, the need is in our thinking at the moment. We've said, from day one, that when it comes to companies generally across New Zealand, and jobs generally, we're doing our best to cushion the blow—that's why the wage subsidy scheme exists. But, unfortunately, if a company like Bauer takes the attitude that they have, then we can't save every job and every company. But when it comes to media—*[Interruption]* But to answer your question, when it comes to media, yes, we understand the importance of that, and Minister Faafoi is talking almost every day with media companies in New Zealand.

Media: On the wage subsidy, what is that? What's realistic? The Government's not going buy newsrooms—MediaWorks, NZME, and Stuff?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, look, what we have to do is have a conversation about how we make sure that that plurality in media exists. Quite clearly, we don't want the Government owning all media, but what we do have to do is make sure, as part of our recovery packages, that there is something that supports different voices in the media. So we'll continue to work on that, and that's the exercise that Minister Faafoi has already under way—

PM: Patrick, to be fair, there have already been initiatives. Of course, we have to keep in mind that we do fund, and have increased funding for, our State broadcaster through Radio New Zealand. There's been the fund that was created in order to encourage greater local journalism. There's also NZ on Air. Those are all mechanisms to try and encourage New Zealand content across multiple platforms. What we're recognising now is that there even more so is a need for us to take a look at making sure that all of that support is

platform-neutral and is fit for purpose in the environment we're in. One thing I should add on my commentary on Bauer is that what I say does in no way relate to the people who are working here locally, keeping in mind that this is an operation that operates out of headquarters that, ultimately, are in Europe.

Media: Do you like former Prime Minister Helen Clark's idea for a New Zealand on Air but for print?

PM: Well, in some ways, you could say that actually the fund that was established by Minister Faafoi that encouraged and supported journalism through print journalism was a form of that. So I think, you know, we have supported and created options like that, because we've recognised that long-form journalism, investigative journalism in particular, is something that is being under considerable strain, and yet we all benefit from it. OK, we'll take the last two.

Media: We know there's a massive ad budget, including—over many different verticals, including for the Unite Against COVID-19 campaign, and ad revenue is there, media's really hurting, and in a particularly week-to-week kind of acute cash flow way. Could you see yourself massively increasing that ad spending possibly? Just to get us through—

PM: Yeah.

Media: —the next couple of months?

PM: Well, ultimately, you'll see that we have put a huge amount into the public information campaign of COVID-19, and that has been across multiple, and digital, platforms. Ultimately, though, we have to be where people are, and that's what we've sought to do, but it has included news platforms.

Media: What is the cost of the essential leave scheme? And the Government has spent—or pledged to spend—a whole lot of money over the last month, and it's difficult to keep track. How much money has the Government actually spent or pledged to spend?

Hon Grant Robertson: So, in terms of the answer to the final question, around about \$22 million—billion dollars. I used to talk in millions; now I talk in billions—\$22 billion. In terms of the essential workers leave scheme, that has been a very difficult one to estimate. We've estimated it at \$100 million, but obviously that will be dependent on take-up, and as we put the scheme out, we'll get a better idea, but that's the envelope of funding we've put up.

Media: [*Inaudible*] Do you have a cap for some of the figures—

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, obviously we—before Parliament rose—we passed the Imprest Supply Bill, which enabled the Government to be able to spend up to \$52 billion, but that is an envelope, not a target. But that's what's available to us through this process and, obviously, we're now putting the final touches on the Budget, where you'll be able to see the full details of what we intend to spend there.

Media: This is a sport question, Mr Robertson, please forgive me—

PM: I'm very pleased you're here.

Media: Australia's National Rugby League says it's trying to revive the NRL competition. It wants the Warriors in that competition and says it's in talks with the New Zealand Government about the restart. Is that true, and can you share details of the discussion?

Hon Grant Robertson: They're not in talks with me; so I don't have any detail on that particular aspect of it. I can imagine they may be talking, potentially, with Sport New Zealand, the body that oversees sport here. Clearly, as we go forward—and sport's a good example of an area where income has dried up. Not so much the Warriors, but in terms of community sport, people get their funding particularly from lotteries, class four gaming, sponsorship—a lot of those sources have dried up. So the future of community sport, the

future of elite sport—all of these things are part of the work we're doing around a potential sports recovery package along with the other areas we've been talking about.

PM: OK, thank you, Jenna—last one.

Media: The CTU is saying that Fletcher's is asking their employees to take a 70 percent pay cut, while the execs are only taking a 15 percent pay cut. Is that fair?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, my understanding is that Fletcher's have—and I saw the details of this had come out last night—that Fletcher's have got a graduated scheme that they're looking at, which, for the period of the four-week level 4 process, sees people paid at 80 percent, and then it graduates down from there if they need to continue to not—well, if they don't have revenue and they need to continue with a wage subsidy process. Clearly, each business will take into account their own circumstances. We've certainly seen Fletcher's executives offer to take the pay cut they have had. They're now in negotiations with their unions, and I'm sure this will be a topic they discuss.

PM: Keeping in mind the requirement on Fletcher's—as it is with any business—is that they must pass on the full value of the wage subsidy to their staff; and so any of those reductions, ultimately, I imagine, in the way they've constructed their scheme is that they are still topping up.

Hon Grant Robertson: And they have fully committed that at no point would any staff member be paid less than the full level of the subsidy.

PM: All right. Thank you, everyone.

conclusion of press conference