

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 6 APRIL 2020

PM: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to day 12 of our COVID-19 alert level 4 lockdown, and to my daily update. First of all, an update on our wage subsidy scheme that is helping to keep people in their jobs, connected to their workplace, and with an income, so businesses can come through this challenging time and keep going out the other end with their workforce intact. A total of 876,000 people so far have shared in \$5.3 billion which has been paid out. This is an incredible number when it comes to money we've got out the door in just a few weeks, particularly when you consider that in a number of other countries their wage subsidy schemes haven't yet started paying out and nor are they scheduled to, in many cases, for some weeks to come.

One of our strong principles in deciding on the wage subsidy scheme was that cash flow was going to be critical for businesses and for their employees, which is why we moved to a mechanism that would enable that as quickly as possible. MSD is still working hard through applications. In fact, I had a conversation with the chief executive over the weekend. They had hundreds of their workers in working long hours processing applications to support those many employees and those many businesses. Treasury estimates that between \$8 billion and \$12 billion will eventually be paid out under the scheme, all in support of workers.

This amount of investment requires a level of transparency, and when Minister Robertson introduced the scheme, he said that a public register will follow. That searchable database will be available shortly. That searchable database will enable anyone, any member of the public—but particularly employees—to search the company name and see whether or not their workplace has been a recipient of the wage subsidy.

I want to reflect on an issue that has been front of mind for us during this period of lockdown, and that's the issue of mental health. I know there are some people who are feeling distressed, anxious, or worried at this time, and that is completely understandable. In a short interview that I did with psychologist Nigel Latta last week, he made the point that none of us—no Kiwi in the country right now—would be alone in feeling like that, and that no one should be too hard on themselves at this particular point in time. That's why we will, tomorrow, release campaigns and resources with tips designed to help Kiwis cope with the stresses created by COVID-19, not just through lockdown but beyond that, too. These are guided by best-practice health promotion, and focuses on providing people with the tools they need to be able to manage their worries, look after their mental health, and connect with loved ones, despite operating from their own bubbles at this time.

I want to touch quickly on the issue of level 4 and questions on the length of time that we'll be here which, understandably, I've had from both you in the media and members of the public. As I've said a few times now, we have a broad set of indicators that we'll be looking to to assess our movement between alert levels, but we're also looking at more detail around some of those indicators. But let me be really clear: I don't want New Zealand to be at level 4 a minute longer than needed, but, equally, there is no plan to move from level 4 early. I just wanted to be nice and clear on that, as it was a question that was raised with me this morning.

All actions we are taking to date are about minimising the amount of time we are at level 4, in order to stamp out the virus, and our actions for the remainder of the period in level 4 will be about doubling down to ensure the gains made in the first half aren't squandered in the second. We are determined to make sure that we stamp out COVID-19. That means broader testing and, in particular, surveillance testing; more and faster contact tracing; and strong enforcement of the lockdown rules and, of course, border controls. Now is not the time to ease up, but rather the time for all of us to focus even harder on the mission that we have.

With that in mind, I want to repeat the rationale for why we're at alert level 4 for four weeks. First, the virus can take up to 14 days to show signs, so cases we are seeing coming through now can be people who had the virus prior to the lockdown but were asymptomatic. Those people may have passed the virus on to close contacts prior to the lockdown, so we can expect to see these close contacts coming through now and in the next week as well. And, of course, these people may have passed it on to others in their bubble or their essential workplace, as well. So the lockdown ought to have stopped wider transmission, but we can expect to continue to see cases and contacts of those cases still coming through. Because of this time lag in the virus rearing its head, four weeks is the minimum time needed to ensure the chain of transmission from these cases is stopped. And it's the reason we were very deliberate and really clear with New Zealanders that it would be four weeks when we went into alert level 4, just to give everyone that level of certainty.

We also need to better understand the cases of community transmission and have certainty there isn't wider presence in the community than we are aware of. This is especially true in areas with low case numbers. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. We need to be absolutely sure we're not missing silent outbreaks. And that is where surveillance testing is so important—you've heard the director-general talk about that, and myself—and that is something the Ministry of Health is working on as we speak. We'll be using, then, the next two and a half weeks to collect significantly better data on the risk of unseen transmission in our community to help inform our decision making about level 4 and the other levels.

But I repeat: there is no desire to be in lockdown for any longer than we need to be. And we need to do that, of course, for enough time to ensure we have the information needed both nationally and regionally to move out of level 4 with confidence that we have community spread under control and that the sacrifices made by New Zealanders will have paid off.

A quick word on stranded New Zealanders—to date, MFAT has facilitated the return of 334 New Zealanders, in addition to those who have returned on commercial flights. As you will have seen from the statement made by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the New Zealand Government has made arrangements to charter a flight for New Zealanders stranded in Peru to depart the country, following agreement with the Chilean Government to allow the necessary transit that we needed to get them home.

I'm also pleased to report that we were able to extract 11 New Zealanders from strict and extended lockdown conditions in the Tyrol region in Austria, along with around 20 Australians. The group exited the quarantine cordon on a chartered bus and have now boarded a flight bound for Auckland via Doha. Our diplomats in Vienna worked closely with their Australian partners, and we're really grateful for that partnership and for Australia's assistance there too. Together we collaborated with our Austrian counterparts and with regional police and Qatar Airways to help New Zealanders home in a very trying and complex situation.

We are aware of three more Kiwis who want to return to New Zealand from that same region, and our officials will continue to work to help them with that exit. These are really complex consular operations requiring close collaboration with multiple Governments and authorities, as you can imagine, with different countries in different forms of lockdown at present.

Finally, some very good news from the wider health sector that I wanted to share today: the last patients involved in the Whakaari / White Island tragedy have now been discharged from the National Burn Centre in Auckland. The volcanic eruption on December 9 in which 21 people lost their lives set in motion a massive national and international response in which the National Burn Service, which is hosted at Middlemore, was really key. Now, whilst there are still those who were affected by Whakaari / White Island eruption still in other parts of our health system, I do want to pay tribute to those at Middlemore who played such a huge role in the critical care of so many. I visited Middlemore just before Christmas and met with some of the staff, met with some of the family, and they do incredible work—very, very difficult work—and you can only imagine the circumstances under which they were working after that tragedy. I want to thank all of the health sector who were involved

across the country in that response, because we've now reached a really important milestone for them, and despite the situation we find ourselves in now, I didn't want to let that milestone pass without acknowledging them. I'm open to questions now.

Media: Prime Minister, when you talked about the four weeks, you said there's no plan to leave early. Can I just be 100 percent clear that we absolutely will do the full four weeks?

PM: Yes. We are here for four weeks, and every day of those four weeks is incredibly important. We need those full two cycles to make sure that we have a true sense of those who went into lockdown with COVID and may have passed on to others while we've been in lockdown—that's why that full four weeks is so important. So we need to stay the course.

Media: Are we on the right track for that to lift after four weeks at the moment?

PM: You will have heard that actually that halfway point and beyond becomes important for us to seeing the full effects of all of the important sacrifices New Zealanders have made now. You will have seen, though, that for a little while now we've seen some stabilisation of our numbers. I don't want to get ahead of ourselves but we have positive signs, not least the fact that had we not done any of this, we could have potentially had 4,000 cases now rather than the roughly 1,000.

Media: On the regional lists, Dr Bloomfield named Auckland Central, Waikato, and Southern district as the main areas of community transmission. Are they likely to remain at level 4 for longer than the four weeks?

PM: You will have heard both the director-general and myself talk frequently about the importance of getting regionalised data because we may end up in a position down the track where we have some regions that are dealing with outbreaks but other parts of the country that aren't. We need the flexibility to be able to move New Zealand into different levels if that's the best way for us to cope with that outbreak.

Media: What about contact tracing? What work's been done to start the digital contact tracing?

PM: I've already asked for advice from our officials on to what extent we can use the technology that already exists. No one wants to reinvent the wheel, and we've seen countries like Singapore who have created options, and we'll be reaching out to them and others around the sharing of some of that technology, but also making sure that we've got something fit for purpose for New Zealand.

Media: There are, though, a number of those countries where apps are already up and running. Have we dropped the ball on this? Were we too slow to act?

PM: No. Again, some of those countries are actually, I think, of a mind to be open about some of the work they've done. We've already asked both the private sector here in New Zealand to think about what may be possible here, and the Ministry of Health and other agencies right now are also working up ideas for how we can use technology to help with our contact tracing. One thing I will say, though, is that no matter what technology can offer us for contact tracing, it will still be critical that we have those one-on-one interviews where we really interrogate where people have been and who they've been in contact with, because an app will only tell us so much.

Media: Can you clarify, on surveillance testing, are we going to see random testing within communities, as the director-general seemed to think that was only a maybe at this stage.

PM: Yeah, so he at the moment is working with the Ministry of Health on advice around what surveillance testing specific to this scenario, both for COVID and for a level 4 lockdown, because you'll remember we have something called sentinel testing, which gives us intelligence around the movement of influenza in our community during flu season, but that relies on people much more proactively presenting to their GP, which is happening less so while we are at this level. So we are having to design something specific for our circumstances, but the outcome we're looking for is more data in the parts of the country where we may have had fewer cases, so not so much testing, because we need to make

sure that we have something that's statistically robust for us to make decisions around for the movement between level 4 and other levels.

Media: Are we going to see random testing? It sorts of seems this morning you were suggesting that could start quite soon.

PM: Again, what we're trying to do is not just rely on those who are simply, necessarily simply, presenting, because that's not always producing enough data for us. So, again, I'm expecting more detail from the Ministry of Health around what is going to provide that regionalised evidence base that we absolutely need.

Media: Prime Minister, could you just outline the latest with butchers, bakers, greengrocers. Are they now allowed to take home online orders for contactless food delivery?

PM: You will have heard me say many times before that what you can access in supermarkets people can access through alternative means—online and so on. So that's always existed. What we have said, of course, to those grocers, they can't open their retail ends; they can't open their shops. And that's something we've been utterly consistent on. We cannot have people consistently being in interaction with each other through the retail side of multiple different food suppliers. Many will not have those functions, and so that has precluded many from continuing to operate.

Media: Sorry, just to be clear on that, are butchers, bakers, and greengrocers allowed to operate online delivery services?

PM: There's always been guidance that whole foods can be provided online. You would have heard me say that yesterday. That's always been the guidance of MBIE. That's why you've got outlets like My Food Bag, who have continued to operate, and others.

Media: MBIE's just come back and said no decisions have been made around that when we—

PM: You were asking a specific question, I understand, around butchereries who have no online provision, as I understand.

Media: Prime Minister, some solo parents have found it difficult looking after their children and going to get groceries and going to the dairy given the restrictions during the lockdown. Some have had to leave their children in cars or even at home while they quickly go and do the shopping. What support is there for people in that situation?

PM: Yeah, I have seen this raised with me online, and it does present, you know, a specific issue that is unique to one group who are in a particularly difficult position. Essential workers, they have some provision for care, and so that's being provided through agencies already, but for those who are just sole parents on their own, we do have to make sure that they're able to feed themselves. And so if they don't have someone who's able to support them with grocery shopping, then, ultimately, they are going to have to have that flexibility to be able to go and undertake those essential services with their child with them.

Media: Prime Minister, I know you're waiting on the World Health Organization guidelines on masks, but I think there's a bit of confusion out there still. What's your advice to people? Should they be wearing masks when they go out in public?

PM: And again, I look to the director-general on this, and I know he's commented on this a number of times. And so his view is that, of course, for those front-line workers, that there is good reason and good rationale for them using appropriate face masks and PPE. The jury is still out, in his view, on wider use by the general public, but we will continue to access all of the most up-to-date evidence and make sure that we move with that. In the meantime, there is no substitute for social distancing and good handwashing practice.

Media: Prime Minister, should Simon Bridges travel between Tauranga and Wellington to do his job? Is that appropriate?

PM: Ultimately, we've set up a select committee arrangement that has given flexibility to MPs to practise the guidance that has been put out by the Ministry of Health in alert level 4. So it's a remote meeting, it enables people to be at a distance, and enables people to fulfil the same requirements that every other New Zealander is right now. Then, in my view, it's up to those members of Parliament to choose how they engage with that committee.

Media: Do you sense this lockdown has become more political? Because National have opened up a number of different attacks on the lockdown—they're calling for more businesses to be open; they've consistently attacked you on testing. Do you feel that there is now a divide on what should be happening?

PM: Oh, look, ultimately, the Opposition are going to do what the Opposition choose to do. We have, of course, really prioritised making sure that in these extraordinary times; we're still creating an avenue for us to be held to account. So we take that role very, very seriously, but, ultimately, it's not for me to decide how the Opposition choose to operate while we're in this global pandemic.

Media: In your mind, has Simon Bridges breached the rules by travelling from Tauranga to Wellington?

PM: I have not made—and it's not for me to make—a determination as to how the Leader of the Opposition determines himself when we're dealing with essential services, but what was important to me is that we made sure people could participate from their homes. I didn't want to create a situation where people were forced to be away, for instance, from their families for a prolonged period of time. So that flexibility is there. Then it is ultimately up to those MPs to make their own decisions.

Media: But it's about leading from the top, isn't it? So when people are looking to MPs, to their behaviour, as to what they should be doing, if Simon Bridges is travelling to Wellington when perhaps he doesn't need to, because he can partake in a Zoom call, is that sending the wrong message to the public?

PM: Again, all I'll say is that, for me, the most important thing was that we created the mechanism. It is conducted online. It means that people can do it from their home, and that's what we've asked other Ministers to do. You'll only really see those who are within this region who are presenting here. But, ultimately, that is a decision for the Leader of the Opposition.

Media: Some business executives are taking pay cuts to help their businesses weather this storm. Are yourself and your Ministers considering doing the same?

PM: I wouldn't rule that out, but what I'll say at this stage, as well, is that you won't find a group of individuals who are more acutely aware of the pain that exists in their community right now and the huge sacrifices of New Zealanders, and so you can imagine that that's top of our minds at the moment. So I won't rule that out.

Media: Can I please ask about enforced quarantine with Kiwis coming back into New Zealand in coming weeks. You mentioned it briefly this morning in your interviews. This is something the Government is looking at planning for. Would the military be involved in that in any way?

PM: Yeah, and, look, that's not something that I would, again, at this stage, be too quick to fall down on one particular solution at this stage, because, keeping in mind, as we've said, contact tracing—aggressive contact tracing—self-isolation, and border controls will be our new normal for some time to come. So what we do at the borders, we're going to need to sustain for, potentially, a long period of time. So I want to come up with a solution that's workable, that keeps in mind the public health needs we have, the fact that we'll need to meet the needs of those who will be in that quarantine, and that will be sustainable over a long period of time. So those are all factors that we're working on as we speak.

Media: Sorry, can I just clarify: are they for level 3, or may they come in before level 3?

PM: Oh, ultimately, no; I'm expecting advice very shortly, so, no, that wouldn't need to wait.

Media: Just on taking a pay cut, is this something you've discussed with your colleagues?

PM: As I've already said, I'm not ruling anything out, and I know my colleagues well, and I know that we are all acutely aware of the pain that our communities are feeling right now. And we feel that and we see it, and so you can imagine the kinds of discussions I've been having with colleagues.

Media: Is the Government's other business—stuff like the RNZ - TVNZ merger, the light rail, the water reforms—is that frozen while we're in this level 4 kind of alert stage, or are you still expecting progress on that—

PM: Well, some of it actually is as relevant now as it's ever been, and I would particularly point to your industry. This global pandemic underscores the importance of the public having access to news, information, and, particularly, with the domestic context—it's not just about what people can access without a paywall globally. So this is a time where I think we're seeing the huge issue of needing information but the fact that advertising revenue has been increasingly diluted over time. So that's an area I expect to expedite our work. On those other areas, keep in mind, Ministers are still working and public servants are still working, so work continues, but there are some things that we are not in a position to continue at the same pace.

Media: Just a follow up on that question before, would it just be Ministers that you're looking at pay cuts, or would you support a call for all MPs to take a 20 percent pay cut for 12 weeks?

PM: Again, I haven't given any specificity on numbers or reach, but what I have told you is that I won't rule that out, because I think I know well the people that I work with.

Media: Is it fair that Kiwi Income Property wants its 200-plus tenants at Sylvia Park to pay full rent during lockdown?

PM: I've seen lots of different circumstances, and what I have asked generally is that where we have people who have been gravely affected by COVID-19, and the lockdown in particular, that we see compassion, and I say that at all levels. Now, the banks have offered mortgage holidays for those who have investment properties where they still have mortgages. That would be an opportunity, then, to pass on that compassion from one to another.

Media: Why not make it mandatory for commercial landlords to negotiate with their tenants, or landlords with their tenants?

PM: Yeah, and we have been looking more broadly at some of the commercial rental issues, because it becomes a domino effect, ultimately. And so whilst we have continued to ask that we see the same expectations that we've set as a Government, and from banks, both in terms of mortgage holidays but also evictions and rent arrears—whilst we've got some control over that, in areas where we haven't, we want to see, actually, communities reflect the expectations we all have. That hasn't stopped us doing extra work as well, though, in that area.

Media: The Director-General of Health spoke briefly earlier about potential mandatory quarantining at the border once we leave this lockdown period. Would you consider that moving to quarantining everyone at the border once we progress into alert level 3?

PM: Oh, again, I don't want to be limited just by the movement in our alert levels. I've already asked for this work to be done. This is an area where I think we'll only continue to see it ramping up, but, as I've said, we've got to make sure that what we do do is able to be sustained for a long period of time and it becomes a bit of our new normal, and so I think the public expect that that's likely to be the case. But as soon as we're ready, I expect you'll hear me say a bit more over it.

Media: Do you have a handle on how many Kiwis are in Peru and when we might be able to get them back?

PM: Yes, we've just put out—my recollection is that we have put out the specific numbers in the announcement that's just come from the Minister, and, so, happy to provide that to you. Again, that's been one that's been complicated by the issue of not being able to transit through Chile. We did have an earlier chartered flight that was chartered by Australia; New Zealanders were due to go on that, but then there was some issue with the length of time they would be required to transit in Australia before coming to New Zealand, and their seats were, essentially, lost. So this one we've been working on for some time—it has not been straightforward but very pleased to see some resolution.

Media: On a slightly different note, we've had some correspondence from some younger viewers who are quite concerned this weekend—

PM: The Easter bunny?

Media: —about the Easter bunny. Have you considered any exemption for the Easter bunny, because, of course, he would be breaking the bubble of many families?

PM: Yes, you'll be pleased to know that we do consider both the tooth fairy and the Easter bunny to be essential workers. But as you can imagine at this time, of course they are going to be potentially quite busy at home with their family as well and their own bunnies, and so I say to the children of New Zealand: if the Easter bunny doesn't make it to your household, then we have to understand that it's a bit difficult at the moment for the bunny to perhaps get everywhere. But I have a bit of an idea: that maybe in lieu of the bunny being able to make it to your home, you can create your own Easter hunt for all the children in your neighbourhood. So if you're one of those homes that's had a teddy in your front window, maybe draw an Easter egg and pop it into your front window and help children in your neighbourhood with their own Easter egg hunt, because the Easter bunny might not get everywhere this year.

Media: The slight loosening—not the Easter bunny, but the slight loosening of some of the essential business criteria, is that a result of the lockdown largely working?

PM: Ultimately, we have to maintain the absolute parameters that we've always had, and that includes, of course, that people are able to access essential services in person, but also, sitting behind that, that people are able to access essential services online, because that's another way that they can have that contactless ordering. It has taken the pressure off, and things like My Food Bag have continued to operate through this period. So that's been a consistent position. One thing I would say, though, is that my concern is that anyone who looks at our numbers—that they cannot be complacent. The moment anyone decides that they can start loosening up on level 4, that is a dangerous place for New Zealand to be. The fastest way for us to get out of level 4 is for everyone to comply with level 4 right till the end.

Media: The chief medical officer in Scotland has resigned because she breached the lockdown rules. Should David Clark follow suit?

PM: No.

Media: She's also apologised really profusely to police and hospital staff. Why haven't we seen similar contrition from David Clark?

PM: Minister Clark has apologised to me, and I'm sure that if you have an opportunity to ask him, I'm sure he'll likewise do the same to you.

Media: It's not to me; it's to police and hospital staff, who he inadvertently put at risk by driving out to a mountain bike park. Why hasn't he delivered a message to them?

PM: Ultimately—and, again, when I say "me", you will understand I mean members of the New Zealand public. He has apologised to me. He knows that he needs to role model

the behaviour we expect of all New Zealanders, and I know he feels that acutely. So I'm sure you'll hear him speak more on that when you have that opportunity to ask him.

Media: Has he offered his resignation to you?

PM: Absolutely not, nor would I seek it. I think that would be absolutely wrong for New Zealand. We have a competent Minister of Health, who is doing an incredible job under very difficult circumstances for all New Zealanders and health workers. What we need now is his continued stability of his leadership and the continued work that he's doing for everyone.

Media: Prime Minister, when will surveillance testing start? Sorry if I missed the answer earlier.

PM: Yeah, so my expectation, we do need to make sure that we have it for the latter part of the lockdown. So I'm expecting that advice pretty soon, and I expect that the Ministry of Health will be looking to implement that as soon as possible, but ideally you'd want it for the last two weeks. OK, I'll take just the last couple.

Media: How concerned are you about Tropical Cyclone Harold, and will recovery efforts be hampered because of coronavirus? I'm talking specifically about New Zealand [*Inaudible*] recovery efforts.

PM: Yes. So, actually, I had an update on this by the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Foreign Affairs at Cabinet today. It is concerning. It does look like it's coming into the Pacific with considerable force. We, as you can imagine, are at the ready. The Defence Force is at the ready. As you would expect, regardless of what's going on in New Zealand, that's the role that we play. So they're prepared. We do have some foreign nationals and New Zealanders in Vanuatu, and my understanding is that MFAT is already in contact with them, not only about getting them out of Vanuatu generally but in preparation for what they may experience with the cyclone as well. OK, last question—right in the back.

Media: What are you doing about payWave? Fees have been taken off debit card transactions but not credit card transactions, and the Australian Government has managed to get Australian banks to raise the threshold for contactless payments from, you know, \$100 to \$200. That's one of the last contact payments that people have going for them. Is there any work that you're doing around taking those fees off?

PM: You will have seen that—given that we, of course, have the same institutions, that we've certainly sought that where there have been moves like that across the Tasman, that we've sought to have similar moves here. That's not one I've had raised with me yet, but I'd be happy to raise with the Minister of Finance. But particularly things like, obviously, mortgage holidays—we've really prioritised some of those really big-ticket items for the purposes of New Zealanders.

Media: Dentists are saying that they have to ration PPE and some practices can't open because they don't have any. Do DHBs need to do a better job getting it out to clinics?

PM: Again, as I've always said, the supply is there. DHBs do need to make sure that front-line health workers have the PPE they need. OK, thanks.

conclusion of press conference