

**ALL OF GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCE: FRIDAY, 28 AUGUST 2020**

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, kia ora koutou katoa. Nau mai, haere mai ki tēnei hui pāpaho i Te Paraire—welcome to Friday’s media conference, everybody. I’ll first hand over to Dr McElnay to give you an update on the numbers and then make a few brief remarks after that.

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Thank you. Tēnā koutou katoa. There are five new confirmed community cases of COVID-19 to report today and seven imported cases, giving us a total of 12 new cases. The five community cases are all linked to the Auckland cluster. Four of the cases are from one household and are linked to the Mount Roskill evangelical church sub-cluster. The other case is epidemiologically linked to a known other confirmed case not part of the Mount Roskill cluster. The seven imported cases all arrived on the same flight on 23 August and tested positive on their day three tests, and they will be transferred to the Jet Park quarantine facility. By this morning, our contact tracing team had identified 2,475 close contacts of cases, of which 2,433 have been contacted and are self-isolating, and we are in the process of contacting the rest. There are 161 people linked to the community cluster who have been transferred to the Auckland quarantine facility. This includes 88 people who have tested positive for COVID-19 and their household contacts. There are 11 people with COVID-19 in hospital today. Three are in Auckland City, four in Middlemore, three in North Shore, and one in Waikato. Eight people are on a ward and three are in ICU—one each in Middlemore, North Shore, and Waikato hospital. There are seven previously reported cases who are now considered to have recovered, bringing the total number of active cases to 130. Our total number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 is now 1,363, and that is the number that we report to the World Health Organization.

And on testing, yesterday our laboratories processed 11,010 tests for COVID-19, bringing the total number of tests completed to date to 730,330. Widespread testing is a critical part of our COVID-19 elimination strategy, and we continue to work with the broader health sector to carry out 70,000 tests over the next week. In support of this, testing sites will be open this weekend right across the country. This includes GPs and community-based assessment centres. Pop-up testing sites continue to move around Auckland communities to ensure nearby, easy, and equitable access to testing, particularly for Māori and Pacific communities. I’d like to hand back to the Minister.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Thank you, Dr McElnay. We’re now 2½ days away from Auckland moving down to alert level 2, and I want to thank the people of Auckland. Despite dealing with our largest cluster ever, we are able to move down alert level because of the commitment shown by Aucklanders to fighting the virus’ spread. Over the past few weeks, you have been tested in record numbers, stayed home to stop the spread, and supported those communities most affected. As a result of your actions, New Zealand remains in a comparatively positive position to other countries who have experienced second wave outbreaks, with a small number of daily cases, no additional cases, and no spread of the virus beyond the cluster. So thank you. We are nearly there, but the job is not quite done, and there are a few things that we are asking of Aucklanders this weekend.

The first is to get a test. If you have any cold or flu-like symptoms at all or are in any way connected to—for example—the Mount Roskill evangelical church or Mount Albert Grammar School, we need you to get tested today or this weekend. In order for Auckland to move with confidence to level 2, we need to know that there are not further undetected cases in the community. Today, there are pop-up sites in south Kaipara, Mt Smart Stadium, the Massey Community Hub, Rānui Library, the Tongan Methodist Church in Māngere, the Māngere East Hawks Rugby League Club, the Tupu Youth Library in Ōtara, Randwick Park School, and Te Matariki community centre in Clendon.

## Hansard Transcript

I want to say a special thankyou to the church leaders and church communities who have rallied around these recent cases. No one invited COVID in, but a huge amount has been done in recent days to keep it out, and I reiterate: there is no blame and getting COVID, but please do get a test if you are feeling at all unwell. I also need to remind Aucklanders that restrictions do still apply until 11.59 p.m. on Sunday evening. We've done a great job; we're almost there. Let's finish the job.

The second message is that, with the Auckland economy reopening under level 2, we need to be aware that this is a little different to last time. Last time we had days without cases before the move; this time there will continue to be cases and for some time. So we do need Aucklanders to behave in order to not inadvertently spread the virus. That's why we're keeping gathering sizes to 10 only for events like faith-based gatherings and church services or birthday parties and weddings. We have seen these gatherings spread the virus so we're being extra cautious for now. There will be a limit, as you know, of 50 people for authorised funeral or tangihanga, and we request that those travelling out of Auckland be considerate about where they're going and how many people they're interacting with. The last thing we want from reopening Auckland up is to spread the virus around the country.

I also want to remind us of the things that Aucklanders can do at level 2 from Monday. Businesses can open to the public, with customers on their premises so long as there is physical distancing. Hospitality businesses are open, including bars, but with the three S's—seated, separated, and single server. There can be up to 100 people in a venue but it's limited to 10 per group booking. Let me repeat that: there can be up to 100 people per venue. I've seen reports that there can only be 10 in a venue. That's wrong; it's just groups of 10.

Public venues such as museums and libraries can open and facilities like cinemas and concert venues can have up to 100 people in a defined space. It's safe to send your children to school and to ECE centres. All businesses and public transport will display QR codes, and, as you know, face coverings must be worn on public transport from Monday.

Level 2 will see significantly more economic activity in businesses reopening, but we're doing this in a staged way for a reason, with new precautions like face coverings required in certain settings. These precautions are a small price to pay for getting more of our freedoms back faster.

I just want to make a couple of other comments before we get to questions. The first of those is around the action that the Government is helping to take—to support NZX Ltd. NZX is a private company. We recognise that it is important that the Government works with private companies like them when they are faced with issues like the cyber-attack that they are currently experiencing. There are limits to what I can say today about the action the Government is taking behind the scenes due to significant security considerations, but I want to confirm the following: we are aware of the impact that this is having on the stock market and officials and Ministers have been working with the NZX. Ministers have asked the GCSB to assist and the National cyber-security centre within the GCSB are assisting NZX. The national security system has been activated, which ensures coordination between agencies in order that we support the NZX. As I said, you'll understand I can't go into much more in terms of specific details, other than to say that we as a Government are treating this very seriously. We are aware of the impact that it is having and that is why we have directed the GCSB to help the NZX with this situation.

I just want to make some comments around the wage subsidy. From when we announced the wage subsidy back in March, tens of thousands of New Zealand businesses have been eligible for 22 weeks of payments to help them keep their staff. And because we're supporting businesses with wages, this has freed up cash flow for other costs like rent. There is no doubt that these investments have saved jobs and kept businesses open. I am fully aware of the trying circumstances that some businesses are facing. The fact that we have been able to offer 22 weeks of the wage subsidy while New Zealand was at level 4 and level 3 for just seven weeks of that timing, just over nine weeks in Auckland, shows

how committed we are to supporting businesses and jobs as we respond to the impacts of COVID-19.

I do want to remind businesses that applications for the eight-week wage subsidy extension are open until 1 September, if you meet the 40 percent revenue drop threshold and have not accessed it already. And the new two-week wage subsidy for the latest restrictions is also open. Please do check if you are eligible.

We are seeing positive signs about how robust the New Zealand economy has been through the wage subsidy. The wage subsidy extension began ending from 5 August. The companies that signed up when it was introduced in June started rolling off the extension that week. Between 5 August and 21 August the majority of wage subsidy extension recipients completed their eight weeks. This represented 93,643 businesses recovering 325,426 jobs. Today, MSD released the COVID income payment and job-seeker data covering the same period. Between 31 July and 21 August, jobseeker recipient numbers have risen by 3,007 and COVID income relief payment recipients have risen by 3,096. So 325,426 jobs came off the wage subsidy between 5 August and 21 August but only 6,103 went on to Government assistance over the same time. It is a tough time for those people but those numbers bear out the importance of the investment that we have made in the wage subsidy. I recognise that every dollar of support given out is a dollar of borrowing for the Government, and that's why we are being extremely careful with every decision we make, making sure that we get the balance right between supporting the important services like our health system and the economy while still keeping our debt under control. It's also why we said we would set aside the remaining \$14 billion in the COVID fund. If that money is not needed it won't be borrowed and it won't be spent. This is all about managing the economy carefully, and I believe we're getting the balance right.

**Media:** With the seven imported cases, can you give us some more details or information about why that number's so high? Was it a surface that they touched or was it sharing a bathroom with someone not wearing a mask? How is that number so high?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Look, I think I'll let Dr McElnay respond to that with any information she has, but I think it's a bit early days at this point to be able to identify that exactly. It is one single flight. It does come from an area of the world where there are a lot of cases, and it's one of the reasons why we treat everybody entering New Zealand as if they have COVID until it is proven otherwise via the testing regime. The testing regime has picked these people up, exactly as it's meant to, and they've now been transferred to the Jet Park. Any more details about exactly how that might have happened we'll have to go into. There's no particular guarantee that it happened on the flight or before—we just don't have that information. Have you got anything to add?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** Only just to reiterate that these people, from the information that we've got so far, are likely to have travelled from a country a high incidence of COVID, so it's highly likely that they've been an undetected case before they got on the plane.

**Media:** So you don't know whether they all had the same strain—so got it on the flight—or whether it's seven separate incidences?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, and we won't have that information at this point in time. Obviously, the tests are now being processed, and the work that can be done then, as you know now, about the genomic sequencing and so on, but let's be clear—they came on a flight, they went through our systems, they have been caught at the border, they've been transferred to the Jet Park quarantine facility. The system is working exactly as we would expect.

**Media:** Just on the wage subsidy, 30,000 jobs supported, \$33 million paid out, is that in line what your expectations were and also, you talked about the benefit—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** So the \$33 million?

**Media:** Paid out in the last week?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No, it's significantly more than that. It's a lot more than that.

**Media:** OK, well, let's scrap that question, I'll move on to the next one. You talked about the benefit and the COVID relief not being a particularly big number. Given that we heard about this sort of second wave that we were meant to have, why is that, or are you surprised by that?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, I think it's the point we've been trying to make all along, which is that what the wage subsidy has done is given employers time to prepare themselves for the new normal, as it were. And so we never felt that every single person who was being supported by the wage subsidy would suddenly lose their job when the wage subsidy ended. Businesses have been reorganising themselves. So the point really just to make is that there's a very large number of people whose jobs were being supported by the wage subsidy that are coming off that. The commensurate rise in people taking up income support is nowhere near that, and I think what that reflects is businesses have been adjusting. We did see that very strong period for the economy through late June and into July, and so it's a good sign for the economy. But I also don't want to diminish the experience of those more than 6,000 people who have moved on to income support. It's tough for them and that's why we've got a lot of initiatives in place to support people through that.

**Media:** And what country—sorry, can you—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Oh, sorry, Jason. Yeah, look, I don't think we know—I don't want to say what country because I don't know what country each traveller was from. The flight was an Air India flight, but that does not mean that the people who came on that flight are necessarily from India. They are all people who are entitled to be in New Zealand—we have to remember that, again. The only people coming in are those who are entitled to be here.

**Media:** Minister, in terms of abscondee from managed isolation facilities, we saw a man abscond to buy booze—he was sentenced to 40 hours' community work. The mother who absconded attempting to take their children to the funeral of their father got two weeks' jail time. Does that comparison seem unfair to you, and do you see threads of institutional racism or unconscious bias in there?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I think you'll understand that as a politician, we avoid commenting on court judgments. The judges in these case make their judgments based on the facts that are in front of them. It is unwise for politicians to intervene in that—perhaps with one very obvious recent exception—to be able to comment on those decisions. There's always rights of appeal in situations that we don't want to involve ourselves in. Obviously, the rules are outlined very clearly to people about the fact that they do need to stay in their managed isolation facilities, but I'm simply not in a position to comment on the different circumstances of those cases, and, as a rule, we try not to comment on those court decisions, particularly when appeal processes are impossible.

**Media:** Do you see any issue with that two weeks' jail time?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** As I say, I'm not going to comment on the specific cases. I'm just not in a position to do that.

**Media:** Minister, in terms of moving to level 2 on Sunday night, what is significantly different from Wednesday to now, and then Sunday?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** From Wednesday until Sunday, nothing—until Sunday this weekend, nothing changes. So we're emphasising to Aucklanders that this weekend, the level 3 restrictions are still in place.

**Media:** As in terms of—so what has changed in terms of the contact tracing, the ability to find the cases in terms of our case numbers, that we are able to move to level 2 on Sunday night?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, we made clear that we were moving to level 2 unless some dramatic thing happened with this particular outbreak. That hasn't occurred. You heard from Dr McElnay that the cases that are coming through are linked to the original cluster. We have got the ability now, using genomic sequencing, to be able to see back further into cases—so even where we're struggling to find that epidemiological link, we've got a genomic link. So we have a cluster that, while it is growing—and we've said that it would—it hasn't breached out beyond there, and it hasn't been as dramatic a thing. So our intention always was to go to level 2, and that's what happening.

**Media:** And you've had no Health advice whatsoever that there's concern with that move?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** None—not at all.

**Media:** In regards to that testing target for Auckland, how many have you done over the past week, and are you on track to meet that target?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** I'm unable to say how many we've done in the last week, but what we have seen in the last few days is that increase in numbers, and we've got a, roughly, 10,000 a day aim, and, certainly yesterday's figure was 11,000, and the day before that, I think, it was 10,000. So if we maintain it at that level, then we're confident that we'll get to the 70,000. It's not just the numbers—the raw numbers. It's also making sure that we're testing in the right places, and we've put out messaging around, particularly, South Auckland and west Auckland encouraging people to be tested.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I'm confident, too, about that in the sense that, you know, we're seeing now with the pop-up stations, with the extra promotion and advertising, we've reached that 11,000 number yesterday. Obviously, we now go into the weekend period, which traditionally sees a bit of a drop-off in the numbers of people being tested. We are going to have significant numbers of pop-up cases, and I do want to make a special—again—thankyou to church leaders. I'm aware that a number of church leaders are doing social media messages this weekend to their congregations, asking them to be tested. So we've got the full weight of the community behind this, and that makes me optimistic we'll reach our target.

**Media:** And have you found that epidemiological link between that church mini-cluster and the main cluster yet—what are your thoughts on that approach?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** We haven't yet found the epidemiological link. We do have the genomic link and we're waiting just to get the final details on the whole genome sequencing. As the Minister says, the science there is now really quite amazing. It allows you to determine how closely related cases can be from the genome sequencing. Everything that we've seen to date shows that this is a cluster. Even if we haven't got the epi-link, it shows that it's a closely linked genetic cluster.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** We'll go Thomas, and then we'll cross over.

**Media:** Just further to Maiki's question, there are a lot of people who are publicly raising concerns about those two different sentences. We're in a political moment now where people are critically questioning institutional racism in the justice system. As a politician, what is your response, not to the sentences, but to the questions that are being raised by voters, by people in the community, who say those two sentences are very different for crimes that look very similar?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, look, the first thing I have to say in response to that is we have separation within our system between executive of Government and the judiciary. The judiciary operate independently, and they make their decisions, and those decisions are there for the public to look at and, no doubt, for some people they will look at these decisions and it may raise questions in their mind. As a politician in the middle of a situation where there is still the potential right of appeal for people, I have to be very careful about what I'm saying. More broadly speaking about the justice system as a whole, we've been

working very hard while we've been in office, particularly through the works of the likes of Kelvin Davis, to make sure that we're providing a system that provides both support, rehabilitation, reintegration, etc., that is culturally appropriate.

**Media:** Minister, can I ask you about overstayers. They're saying that they don't trust the Government's word not to share that information if they do go and get tested. Would you consider a pathway to residency?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** That's not something that we've been talking about at the moment, but what we are saying to people is: you must go and get tested and you need to be able to trust the health system. These are health professionals, often from the same communities. They're there to help you. This is not an exercise about anything, frankly, to do with overstayers. These clinics have been set up to be able to service the communities where we know that this outbreak has been prevalent in. That is why they have been set up there; it is purely for health reasons. Please listen to your pastor, listen to the rest of your community, and come along regardless of your circumstances.

**Media:** Just to go back to this: the 30,000 jobs and the \$33 million are specific to the resurgence wage subsidy in the first week. So is that in line with your expectations?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I think that will grow significantly over the next little while. We've had, you know, obviously just—you know, it started last Friday. I think it will grow and I think it will be higher. Also, you've got to bear in mind at the same time as that, eligibility is and was still open for the original eight-week extension, and we've seen significant growth there. So we knew that a number of businesses would now become eligible for the eight-week extension. The two-week one is more likely to have been taken up by people who had already exhausted that eight-week extension.

**Media:** And just on the support for the travel agency. I understand that MBIE has passed on a briefing document to Minister Faafoi and that he's speaking with you about that. Is that likely to go to Cabinet soon and what can you tell us about what that looks like?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I haven't received that briefing document. I'm aware that Minister Faafoi and, I believe, Minister Davis have been meeting with representatives of the industry, so I look forward to getting from them whatever information they want to pass on to me, but, until I get it, I can't really answer the question about where it might go.

**Media:** Dr McElnay, has there been any trouble with testing facilities in Auckland this morning? We've been told, and I'm wondering if you could confirm, that LabPLUS's IT system is down and that Middlemore is having problems with the processing machine.

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** I haven't been advised of any issues, but we'll look into that and get back to you.

**Media:** Yeah, so just further to Jess's question. So if an overstayer were to test positive and be moved into an MIQ facility along with any of their family members, you can give them the assurance that that wouldn't be passed to immigration at all, and they would be able to go through that process without it raising red flags and them facing deportation?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** What I can guarantee every New Zealander is that if they test—or everyone who's in New Zealand, if they test positive, they will be looked after. The primary concern here is their health, and the primary concern of our whole community is making sure that we don't see COVID spread.

**Media:** Can you tell us anything else about what you've been told about the NZX system. Is the fact that the GCSB is involved a sign that this isn't the case of inadequate infrastructure? And also, what does this do for confidence in New Zealand's markets?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, on the answer to the second question, I mean, the NZX, as I say, it's a private company, but it is part of our overall economic infrastructure and so that's a significant reason why we've got the highest levels of Government involved and our security agencies involved, as well. I'm not really at liberty to go any further than

that, other than to say we're taking it seriously. The GCSB's capability is the thing that's in play here. They know a lot about cyber-attacks, and we can apply that capability to a company who obviously have a critical role.

**Media:** And just a follow-up—sorry, second question. What feedback have you had from the business community about the Ministry of Health's handling of applications for exemptions to operate in Auckland?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I've had a range of feedback. I mean, obviously, if you're a person who's applied for an exemption and it hasn't been processed in the timely manner that you would want it to be, there've been concerns raised about that. Others have had a good process and they've been able to get through it, go about their business. We refined the criteria early on to make sure that a large number of classes of people didn't need an exemption at all. But, obviously, this is the first time that we've put in place regional borders in this way, and so that means that there has been a need to iterate the process. Obviously, it comes to an end on Sunday night and we'll take the lessons from it if we ever had to do it again.

**Media:** Just a question on travel exemptions from Auckland. We've come across several cases where people leaving Auckland Airport during level 3 either haven't had their exemption documentation checked or they've been let through with stuff that doesn't meet the criteria. So what assurances can you give that Aucklanders haven't left who shouldn't have?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** On those particular things we'll have to get more details and then pass that on to the appropriate authority. The Ministry of Health is processing the exemptions, but the responsible agency is Avsec, in terms of the documentation required, so we would need more details to be able to understand what the actual issue is there.

**Media:** It does seem, though, that that detail doesn't exist. The ministry told us they don't know how many exemptions have been granted for air travel; they only know the total. Aviation Security doesn't know how many people have been refused a flight. So if you don't have those full accurate records, how can we be confident that people haven't left Auckland and potentially spread COVID through the country?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** I'll have to get back to you with the details on that.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, look. I mean, it's very clear that the responsibility in terms of Auckland Airport lies with the Aviation Security Service. The Ministry of Health, as you're noting, provide the paperwork that people then use. You'll understand that while those are connected, they're not the same organisation, but if you want to give us the details of that, I'm sure we will be very interested in following up on it.

**Media:** Just on the cyber-attack, obviously the NZX is a private company, but given their sort of structural importance to the wider economy, do you think that GCSB should have gotten involved earlier?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Look, I think the GCSB are involved now, and I think that's the point that is important. We've been—Government Ministers and officials have been in regular contact with the NZX over this period of time. And from a ministerial point of view it's mainly Minister Faafoi, but he's been kept briefed and Government officials have been kept briefed. As I mentioned before, the GCSB role is mostly about their capability that they can bring to this rather than the specific fact that a private company has had this happen to them.

**Media:** Is there any evidence that they perhaps haven't carried adequate cyber-protection in the past? Is that—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, that would certainly be a matter for them to look at. I mean, we have over the last few years in New Zealand, I think, become, as most countries in the world have, critically aware of the importance of cyber-security. A lot of work has gone on between Government security agencies and large private sector companies

around how robust their systems are, but I do think obviously NZX will be reflecting on that and that would be part of what I'd expect we would be briefed on by them.

**Media:** Jami-Lee Ross is running ads that the Labour Party will force vaccines on people. What do you say to that?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** That is completely false.

**Media:** In your opinion, has he doctored footage from the House to—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I haven't seen it, sorry, Jess.

**Media:** Just an update on the two unlinked cases, do we have any more information about the man in North Shore Hospital and the person who came from overseas whose brother went to Hobbiton?

**Dr Caroline McElroy:** The person who's in North Shore has been genomically linked, but we still are investigating the epidemiological link. The person that you referred to as having the link with Hobbiton, we're actually getting further testing of the whole genome sequencing there. At this point we still can't determine whether or not that is an old infection that's been picked up, or, if it is a new infection, where the linkage is. There's been a need to re-analyse the tests there.

**Media:** The US Ambassador self-isolating as opposed to going into a managed isolation facility—are you happy with the protocols and action that's been taken there?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I am. That's a situation which has been here from the beginning of this. When it comes to diplomats, there are conventions that sit in the background. One of those is the Vienna Convention. It means that there are slightly different rules around diplomats, but what is not different is that all the health precautions are taken both in terms of the transportation, of getting here—Ambassador Brown has been tested on day three and day 12. He's self-isolating and is following all of the protocols that need to be followed

**Media:** Can I just change to a topic now for a colleague? At the sentencing of the Christchurch terrorist this week, the court repeatedly heard from victims struggling with ACC. Is the Government failing to support them?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I don't believe so. The Government has provided a great deal of support for the victims and their families—that's included through on-the-ground work with the Ministry of Social Development. It has also included Immigration, ACC, Victim Support—so there's been a wide range of supports there. There are some legal requirements around ACC that I know are frustrating for a lot of people, including those in this case, but in terms of support, we believe we've been able to provide that through other means.

**Media:** The NZX has referred questions about whether or not they've received ransom demands to the GCSB. Are you aware of whether there have been demands?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I'm not aware of that, and you'd need to take that up with the GCSB.

**Media:** Just on the Taranaki Green School: do you think that \$11.7 million was money well spent there?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I think it's worthwhile, and hopefully helpful, to just step back for a bit of context on this. This is a construction project funded through the Infrastructure Reference Group—1,900 projects put in applications for that. Crown Infrastructure Partners went through those and shortlisted just over 800 of them for Ministers to assess. It assessed them on whether they were shovel-ready, how many jobs would be created, how it would support particular economies around New Zealand. There was then a process to whittle that 800-odd down to 150 projects, and clearly there were people advocating for particular projects or particular regions within that. So it is a construction project. We need

to separate that out from the fact that there is obviously a need for support for educational resources, and in the Taranaki region since we came into Government, around \$110 million has been spent in terms of maintenance, building new or rebuilding schools. All of this is the core work of Government that Education does. Overall, we've put in \$1.6 billion into making sure we keep our schools upgraded and deal with deferred maintenance and start to build new schools. So I think, with that context at the background of this, this was being treated as a construction project, it was assessed by independent assessors, and then approved by Ministers.

**Media:** You look at it as an infrastructure project and you talk about the \$1.6 billion—and your Government has repeatedly said that the last Government under-invested in that area. A number of schools in Taranaki and across the country have not seen that money yet; it's been allocated but it hasn't been spent. And you have low decile schools in Taranaki looking down the road at that Green School and saying, "What the hell?" Can you not understand, from their perspective, when they've got leaky classrooms, that it seems a bit rich when it's a private school getting the cash?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** As I'm saying, these are two very different parts of the system and parts of Government, and we are investing heavily. That is a record level of investment. Included within that was the extra \$400 million that's gone in across the country—I think of which about \$11.75 million went for exactly those issues around maintenance. So I am happy to stand by the record of this Government, of having put more money into schools and school maintenance than the previous Government and pretty much any Government before that. There is also a process about shovel-ready projects which regions have put forward to us. I can absolutely understand that if you're in a school and you're looking at that and saying, "Well, why didn't we apply for that?"—they're two different areas; they're two different processes. I'm very, very proud of our record in education spending.

**Media:** Further to that, is there any world in which that funding would be reversed?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I don't believe so. I mean, the Government has made an agreement here. I can understand that there are people who perhaps don't like it or would rather that the decision was changed, but I think the Government's got to act in good faith here with an applicant, and so I've got no intention—

**Media:** Your position is completely different from Chris Hipkins' yesterday. He was happy to throw the Green Party under the bus and say that it wouldn't have been a priority for him. So why are you so supportive of it today?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I'm not—I'm not. I don't think my position is particularly different from Minister Hipkins' at all. He said, from an—

**Media:** So you wouldn't prioritise it either?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** If you let me finish—he said, from an education point of view, it would not be his priority, and it's not. The education capital budget is being spent right across New Zealand, making sure that we fix up and, you know, get on top of the deferred maintenance of the previous Government. We've been doing that. This is part of a different process, and I don't resile from anything Minister Hipkins said. It's most definitely a projected advocated for by the Greens and by Minister Shaw. He's acknowledged that as well.

**Media:** You've been laying out the context of it as a construction project that creates jobs, but the other context is that it's a school for the children of very wealthy parents; they go to school in very flash classrooms. Can you accept that, as a Labour Minister yourself, that doesn't square with your position on funding private schools?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, actually, in terms of this Government, as previous Governments have done, there is a percentage of the funding of all schools in New Zealand that comes from Government. So there are particular parties that might have particular policies, but, actually, that's been a long-term policy of all Governments—that integrated

schools, private schools, do get percentages of their funding from the Government. What I'm prepared to stand behind is the fact that we put in \$1.6 billion more into school maintenance, into building new schools, into upgrading schools than any previous Government has done. I am proud of that.

**Media:** Minister, just two questions from colleagues. First, just clarity on the gatherings, the 100-person gatherings, at level 2. So, for example, for cinemas or theatres, does that mean 100 people in a certain cinema or in the whole facility?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No, there can be 100 people in the cinema—so that is right—as long as they are not in more than large clumps of 10.

**Media:** So, for example, if there—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** But there should be social distancing anyway, so it's irrelevant, in a sense, as to the number.

**Media:** So, for example, if there were, say, 12 different cinemas in a cinema facility, there could be 100 people in every cinema?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** That's correct.

**Media:** And just another question from a colleague. Scott Morrison has today said he's open to the Christchurch terrorist serving his life sentence without parole in Australia. Has the Government given any further consideration to this?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** From yesterday, that is a matter that the Prime Minister, I think, mentioned to you—that she wanted to take soundings from the Muslim community to make sure that she's aware of their views about where they believe the terrorist should serve out his sentence. As you're aware also from yesterday, it's not an easy thing—there isn't a current legal framework that would cover this, so that would have to be worked through as well. On the other side of the coin, if the terrorist is in New Zealand, then we have complete control over the way in which he serves his sentence. So there's a number of factors to be weighed up there, but as the Prime Minister indicated yesterday, her primary concern here is to hear from the victims and their families to be able to understand what they would like.

**Media:** Can I just follow up then, in terms of victims and what I was asking about before in terms of the funding support that they are or are not receiving, some are now calling for you to set up a separate fund for them outside of the likes of ACC, as has been done by other countries, including the US after 9/11. What's your thinking in terms of something like that?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** That's not something that I'm aware that we've looked at. I think we have a lot of processes—we have a lot of agencies in this country who are responsible for delivering support, and while, as I mentioned before, there are certain rules around ACC that, as I say, are frustrating to a lot of people, I believe that through the Ministry of Social Development, through the work that we've done with victim support, through immigration and other services, we are providing the level of support that has been needed. Of course we will listen to the community about what their ongoing needs are.

**Media:** On the \$110 million spent in Taranaki schools that you've just mentioned, that sum would suggest that this green school has probably received more money than any single school in Taranaki, right? When you look at the number of schools in Taranaki, if you've spent \$110 million on public schools in Taranaki since the Government started, that would suggest that—with \$11.7 million being roughly 10 percent of that, that would suggest that this school would probably have received more from the Government than any single school in Taranaki.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, no, that wouldn't be right, because I believe \$23 million has gone to the upgrading of Spotswood College. But, again, I urge you to think of this the way that the Government has thought of this, which is that this was a project put forward

under the infrastructure reference group programme; it fulfilled that criteria; it is going to create 200 construction jobs. Also—and these two things are not mutually exclusive—we are putting significant resources into making sure we upgrade our education stock.

**Media:** Is it possible for you to have a pipeline of public education projects that are shovel-ready so that when this sort of thing comes around again—and I appreciate the argument, right? But when this sort of situation comes around again—hopefully, it won't be any time soon, but when it does, schools have something ready to go so that this doesn't happen?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** There is indeed that education pipeline that is being worked on, and I think if you put those questions to Minister Hipkins he'd be able to tell you at what stage that is at. The money going into our schools is at record high levels. We have committed ourselves to getting on top of the deficit in infrastructure there. This was a project that came through another process. It was strongly advocated for by part of the Government, and it has been funded now.

**Media:** This morning, documents show that you shot down about \$20 billion worth of spending pitches from other Ministers who were looking to get different COVID funds up and running. Could you just maybe potentially give us sort of an indication around what sort of projects you shot down and why?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, what we did fund, to start with—

**Media:** No, no, I know that—I've seen that. I'm looking about what they didn't.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** It's important context, Jason. So what we did fund were things that really strongly support the delivery of public services through the COVID period, and not everybody watching has been as diligent as you so far today and worked their way through that. So, for example, you've got something like the New Zealand Blood Service, who, you know, genuinely were going to struggle to be able to deliver their services. The same applies across a range of areas in education and health and so on. Where some of the other projects went were things that were more tangential to the COVID recovery or were perhaps things that were better suited to a longer-term process when we're a bit clearer about where we've reached in terms of our immediate response and recovery.

**Media:** Can you give us an example, apart from—you don't have to name names, or if you do, that would be way better, but—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Ha, ha! I won't. What I will say is that, you know, it is no surprise during any kind of Budget round that Ministers put up projects well in excess of the amount of money available. I can tell you from experience over the last three years that happens every single time.

**Media:** Is the Government still in discussion with Rio Tinto about its transmission bills, and what sort of transition package are you considering for Southland?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, look, there are ongoing discussions. Obviously, people are aware of the discussions between Meridian and Rio Tinto. I'm going to be careful about the commercial considerations here, but we want to work with the Southland community on a fair and just transition. I was in Invercargill myself on Monday having those discussions. I'm clear, and the Government has been clear for some time now, that a managed exit is better than an abrupt exit, and so we want to work with the Southland community and with Rio on what that looks like. I'll just take a couple more.

**Media:** Is the prudential discount enough? Would that be sufficient?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, one of the issues that was—there was a workshop held earlier this year between Transpower, others, and Rio just to try and get all the issues out on the table. The prudent discount is one element of transmission; there are the elements as well within the new transmission pricing mechanism that hasn't yet come into play. But

I'm not going to go into those details today, because I think you'll understand they're highly commercially sensitive. Just a couple more.

**Media:** Just a question about the Reserve Bank's latest mortgage lending data, according to this, in July the value of high LVR lending to investors more than doubled, so that level actually reached 2016 levels. So, basically, banks were increasing their, sort of, higher-risk lending to investors now that the LVR rules have been taken away. How concerned are you about that? It's a pretty big uptick when you look at the graph.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, I mean, I'm also mindful of the data that came out that said in terms of—you know, first-home buyers had actually gone ahead of investors in terms of access to funding. So I'd have to go back and compare those two data sets. Look, banks make those decisions still based on their own criteria, their own prudent lending rules that they have to be involved in. Clearly, the Reserve Bank made the decision—and it was their decision—around LVRs because they wanted to make sure the market held up. They've also indicated those LVRs can be ratcheted up and down as appropriate, but it remains their independent position. Jo and then Connor, and we'll finish.

**Media:** I understand that James Shaw is wanting to pull the money for the Green School. Can or will that happen?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** You'd need to talk to Minister Shaw about what he wants, but my view is that the Government has a good-faith obligation here to the people who've applied and been told that they have received money.

**Media:** Dr McElnay, yesterday you asked students at Mount Albert Grammar School to get tested, but parents have reported waiting four hours lining up and then giving up. Have you accounted for the zoning that takes place in Auckland schools and the pressure that's going to put on certain testing stations that seem to have a very big backlog?

**Dr Caroline McElnay:** The information that I've been given this morning is that there's been specific arrangements being put in place for students and staff at that school and that there's a number of pop-up stations that they've been informed about that they can go and get tested. We're very keen that they are tested and that they're tested with urgency because we would like the results as soon as possible. So as I say, I've been advised that arrangements have been put in place.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Can I just add to that, too, that this is one of the reasons why we really are encouraging people to use the weekend to be tested. I can imagine it would be frustrating to show up and see a four-hour line. People just need to be able to either stay there but if they can't then recognise that they can come back. I listed off those pop-up stations earlier; I'm sure they'll be on both the Ministry of Health and the COVID websites later. And so we really just really encourage people to say, "I can do this again on Saturday or Sunday." That's what we want.

**Media:** Sorry, just quickly, one last question from a colleague: the health Minister, I believe, was meeting yesterday with Air New Zealand. Are you any closer to determining whether you're going to test all airline crew?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I can fill in on that. There have been a number of discussions with Air New Zealand over the last few days, and both officials from the Ministry of Health and also the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment are continuing those discussions. I hope we'll have something more to say about it early next week. Thanks, everybody. Have a good weekend.

**conclusion of press conference**