

**ALL OF GOVERNMENT PRESS CONFERENCE: FRIDAY, 17 SEPTEMBER 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

Hon Grant Robertson: Kia ora. Ngā mihi ki a koutou katoa. Nau mai, haere mai ki hui pāpaho i te Rāmere. Welcome to Friday's press conference, everybody. I'll very shortly hand over to the Director of Public Health to update us on the latest case numbers and several other matters as well, and then I'll provide a very brief update on economic support and on the trans-Tasman bubble before taking your questions. Dr McElnay.

Dr Caroline McElnay: Ngā mihi, Deputy Prime Minister. Kia ora koutou katoa. We are in the fifth day of Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori / Māori Language Week, and I hope you're all enjoying this week by sharing te reo Māori with one another. Kia kaha te reo Māori. We have 11 new cases of COVID-19 in the community to report today, and all are in Auckland. That takes our total number of cases in this outbreak to 1,007. Of those total cases, I'm pleased to report 549 cases have now recovered. Of our 11 new community cases today, two cases remain unlinked and are still being investigated further. There are also five new cases of COVID-19 in recent returnees in our managed isolation facilities, and details of those cases will be in our media release.

I just want to take a moment to explain where we are at with the various sub-clusters in this outbreak. We classify sub-clusters as active, contained, dormant, or closed, based on the time since the last case associated with that sub-cluster was reported, and other factors like whether the case was a household member. That allows us to have an overall assessment of the situation and assess the risk. So active sub-clusters are cases which have been reported in the previous 14 days and are not household or other known contacts of previous cases. Contained sub-clusters have cases reported in the previous 14 days and are household or other known contacts of previous cases. Dormant sub-clusters are where there are no cases reported in the previous 14 days, and then closed sub-clusters is where there are no cases reported in the previous 28 days. So you go from dormant to being closed. We currently have nine epidemiologically linked sub-clusters identified in this outbreak, of which two are active, seven are contained, and one is dormant. We then have a further 10 epidemiologically unlinked sub-clusters. Of these, two are active, three are contained, and five are dormant. So what that tells us is that we are closing in around this outbreak and that we can be cautiously optimistic about the containment of it.

I want to just touch on some information about the truck driver that was discussed yesterday. Public health officials are investigating the positive case announced today in the Auckland-based truck driver. The truck driver and a member of his household have been transferred to a quarantine facility. I can confirm that he travelled in his work capacity to a number of supermarkets in Auckland, the Waikato, and Bay of Plenty regions. You may have already seen that the first locations of interest related to this case are on the ministry's website. These are in Mount Maunganui, and we are expecting further sites in the Waikato to be put online today once confirmed. If you have been at one of those locations of interest at the relevant time, please follow the advice on the ministry's website, as it does vary depending on the nature of the exposure at that location. We have been advised that he wore a mask and maintained social distancing while he was working. It's important to note that the supermarket the truck driver visited for his work are not listed as locations of interest as they were delivery areas not accessible to the public. The company involved has immediately stood down staff who were in close proximity to the driver and have been assessed as being contacts following a risk assessment completed by public health officials. The company also advises their supermarkets have been operating under all COVID-19 protocols, including scanning or signing in, increased cleaning protocols, physical distancing, and mask wearing.

Truck drivers who come to the supermarkets are required to follow these same protocols and are physically distanced from team members who are loading or unloading goods. At no time do truck drivers enter the shop floor, stores, or sites as part of their delivery or pick-up routine.

On testing, yesterday, 7,400 people in Auckland took the opportunity to get tested, with around 1,710 samples taken from our seven suburbs of interest. That brings our total this week for those suburbs to 9,200. In the past seven days, more than 58,000 people have been tested across the Auckland region, and that's a huge effort.

Testing also remains good across the motu, so thank you very much. Around 15,000 tests were processed yesterday, with a seven-day rolling average of just over 13,000.

Just a comment on boundary testing: police have started checking permitted workers crossing alert level boundaries and checking that they have proof that they have had a test. We would like to remind all permitted workers, including freight drivers, who are intending to travel through the alert level boundary checkpoints around Auckland to ensure that you carry evidence to prove that you've had a COVID test in the past seven days. Police will be asking to see that evidence, and I understand a number of vehicles, including heavy freight trucks, were turned around at the checkpoints overnight for failing to provide that evidence.

Of course, permitted travellers, you can—just a reminder about where to get tested. You can go to any community testing facility nationwide, or book in with your GP. Saliva testing is also an option. We do continue to see a big uptake in saliva testing, with 314 employers, covering more than 3,000 employees, signing up to use it, and since the start of September, we've had over 22,000 essential workers who have taken up the invitation in Auckland to have asymptomatic testing. All results from that testing have been negative.

On waste water: earlier today, ESR reported a positive test result detected from a sample collected on Monday from a catchment in East Auckland which covers the areas of Pakuranga, Bucklands Beach, and Shelly Park. A follow-up sample was taken on Wednesday, and we expect the results of that in the coming days.

With hundreds of recovered cases associated with this outbreak returning home, we do expect to see detections in waste water across Auckland because we know that recently recovered cases can continue to shed the virus. However, waste-water detections like this do reinforce the importance of testing to err on the side of caution, so we really want to encourage a high turnout for testing. As always, we always investigate any positive detection and do repeat samples and see if we can match it up against known cases that are in the community—that have been discharged to the community.

On contact tracing, there are now 1,064 active contacts being managed by our contact tracing team and public health units across the country. Of those, 94 percent have been contacted, 88 percent have been tested, and public health units across the country continue to follow up people in their areas who have outstanding test results.

Just on the MIQ stay, I just wanted to make a point of clarification about the length of stay for community cases in our managed isolation or quarantine facilities. It has always been the case that people arriving in New Zealand from overseas have to stay in a managed isolation quarantine facility for a minimum of 14 days. This has not changed and continues to be the case. For community cases—so cases appearing in New Zealand—identified in the community: for those that are sent to a managed quarantine facility, their stay has been a minimum of 10 days from the onset of symptoms, or a positive test if they remain asymptomatic, including 72 hours of being symptom-free and they meet the criteria for release from isolation as determined by a medical officer of health or a health practitioner.

This continues to be the case for those who reside in a community that is at alert level 4, such as Auckland. The reasons for this is that the lockdown restrictions reduce the risk of any onward transmission, and the risk to the community is considered to be minimal.

On 31 August, we strengthened our guidance in the light of Delta for the length of stay for community cases to 14 days, and that is currently what the other DHBs who are in alert level 2 are following. And just to reiterate, throughout this outbreak, Auckland Regional Public Health have been managing cases in accordance with clinical judgment.

Lastly, I just want to acknowledge the police, and thank our police staff across the country, who are continuing to work with our communities to keep New Zealanders safe and to feel safe, particularly in these uncertain times. And, as an example of that, as I mentioned earlier, the work that the police are doing at our northern and southern checkpoints, at our MIQ facilities, and across the motu—the work that they've been doing is outstanding. It is critical at this time that people adhere to our alert level restrictions, because we've seen that that has worked to get us to where we are, and will continue to work to get our numbers down even further. So kia kaha. Back to you, Deputy Prime Minister.

Hon Grant Robertson: Ngā mihi, Dr McElroy. This morning at 9 a.m., the third round of the wage subsidy and the new Resurgence Support Payment opened for applications. I'd like to remind businesses and sole traders that they can apply for the wage subsidy regardless of where they are based in the country, so long as they meet the eligibility criteria. As of this morning, 480,697 applications for the wage subsidy have been approved, totalling almost \$2.1 billion in payments.

The Resurgence Support Payment, as you know, is aimed at supporting businesses to meet their fixed costs. As I announced on the podium last week, that payment was originally a one-off payment per outbreak, but we have agreed to make it a three-weekly payment, in recognition of the pressure that businesses are under. The first round of the Resurgence Support Payment has so far paid out \$563 million to 184,901 applicants, and this takes the total economic support paid out in this outbreak to almost \$2.2 billion.

As you know, we hope to see Auckland stepping down to alert level 3 next week, and this will mean a lift in economic activity. Based on what happened last time we moved from alert level 4 to 3 and then down to 2, 85 to 90 percent of economic activity is possible under alert level 3. To put some numbers around that, the Treasury estimates that the current scenario, with Auckland at alert level 4 and the rest of the country in alert level 2, is costing the economy about \$700 million per week. But with Auckland in alert level 3, and the rest of the country in alert level 2, the cost to the economy would be around \$260 million a week. As the Prime Minister indicated yesterday, if on Monday we confirm our in-principle decision for Auckland to move to alert level 3, we will also be considering an increase in the number of people who can gather together, including in hospitality venues around the rest of the country, and we anticipate that this would be lifted to 100 people.

I know that that will not solve all of the issues for the affected businesses, but I know it is welcome news for many, particularly in the hospitality industry, and to the cafe-bars owners, venues, and staff there, thank you for doing the right thing and helping us through this outbreak. I know that it's been tough, but we're heading in the right direction and we couldn't have done it without the cooperation of everyone involved.

And finally, an update on the trans-Tasman bubble pause. The initial eight-week suspension to quarantine-free travel with Australia is due to end next Friday, the 24th. The Cabinet has agreed to extend this pause for a further eight weeks, and this will be reviewed again in mid to late November. We're announcing this today so that people in Australia can take part in the MIQ room release on Monday and have the opportunity to access the first tranche of around 3,000 rooms. Flights from Australia will be in October and November. Travellers from Australia should visit the MIQ website to find out how to participate in the room release on Monday. In addition to that, a third managed red flight from Australia to New Zealand is also planned for those in emergency situations, and this follows on from the two red flights that returned stranded Kiwis home to New Zealand on 5 and 15 September. Obviously with those flights, the MIQ costs need to be covered by travellers, and they need a pre-departure test from an accredited laboratory, which is required within 72-hours of travel. Happy to take your questions. Jena.

Media: Just in regards to the 10 versus 14 days, if it's always been 10 days, why does the welcome pack for the community cases in New Zealand say that if you have tested positive for COVID-19 in the community, you will generally be required to stay for at least 14 days?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Often it's a mathematical issue. By the time people—these are cases that we're talking about, so they had symptoms, they have to be symptom-free, and they have to have a minimum of 10 days, and usually what we find, the feedback that I've had from the medical officers of health from across the country is, in reality, very, very few people would be less than 14 days. Because often what we're seeing with COVID is the symptoms persist, and it's the combination of the two factors that needs to be taken into account. So that's probably, just to be simple, why the welcome pack says that

Hon Grant Robertson: And I just think it's important to note that all these decisions are taken by clinicians on the basis of the health of the people concerned. Nobody is being released until a clinician believes that they are in a position to do so.

Media: Why would you let everyone believe that it was 14 days when it's only 10?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well I don't think that is the case, I think you've now from both Dr Bloomfield and Dr McElnay in the last couple of days what the situation is.

Media: Do you have any more information on the numbers being turned around at the border? You said including some heavy freight got turned around, do you have more detail on that?

Hon Grant Robertson: I believe the numbers we heard earlier this morning was that it was around 10 percent of people who had been coming to the border had been asked to go back and get a test. That's perhaps not unexpected on the first full day, as people are getting used to the situation. It's worth bearing in mind that we've established, at the southern border, the ability for people to turn around and go to a very nearby venue to get their test.

Media: Can you put 10 percent in perspective?

Hon Grant Robertson: I'm sorry, I actually don't have the total number, Benedict, but it's a relatively small percentage. As I say, I think on the first day of this we're wanting it to be in. I think perhaps one of the issues here might be around not so much whether someone had a test, but whether or not it's within that seven-day period. But we are offering, as Dr McElnay said, plenty of opportunities for people to be tested, including a site adjacent, essentially, to the southern border.

Media: Is it fair that the Silver Ferns were granted a travel exemption out of Auckland when other people haven't been?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, so that's a decision that the Director-General of Health made, and I'll get Dr McElnay to comment on that if she likes. The director-general looks at those sorts of cases, and my understanding—from what I've heard—is that he considered that, given that it was an international sporting event, it represented only four people, they had been tested, it was low-risk, that it met the threshold. It did come via the business travel rather than the personal travel exemptions, because it's supporting Netball New Zealand in one of their most significant matches that they're playing this year. But I do want to stress that's a decision the director-general takes, completely independent of Government.

Dr Catherine McElnay: No, I haven't been involved at all in that, other than to say that there is a process, and yes it is the director-general.

Media: I guess people might look at that exemption, people that haven't been able to travel for funerals or to see the birth of their grandchildren and go, "Why is a game of sport more important than that?"

Hon Grant Robertson: I accept that for people in those situations it's a very distressing and difficult time. I'll just reiterate that the process by which this application has been made is via the business travel exemption, for which there are many, many people undertaking—

Media: But that's to get food across the border, not to play a game—

Hon Grant Robertson: It's a range of reasons why, it's not just to get food across the border, there are a range of reasons why people are going through that process. But I

reiterate again, this is a decision the director-general makes. We have to trust his judgment in these matters. He's made the judgment that this appears to be safe.

Media: Just another sporting question for you, Minister, is the offer for Team New Zealand for the next America's Cup now definitely off the table, or is it still available?

Hon Grant Robertson: So we've been clear that the extent to which the Government believes that it can put resources in, that wasn't deemed to be enough when we made that offer initially. We would be happy to have further conversations around whether or not there is an alternative proposal where the Government's contribution would be deemed to be sufficient to support it staying in New Zealand. So we're open to conversations, but we've been very clear with Team New Zealand about the extent of the contribution we could make.

Media: How much extra could you pour in to it, even if you provide a percentage?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, no it wouldn't be any extra beyond what we've already suggested we would be able to make available.

Media: Just on the trans-Tasman bubble, given that Australia is now considered to be in that high-risk camp, is it kind of providing, I guess, hope that's not really there to just suspend it for another eight weeks? Because the reality is that pretty much Australia's now in a camp with pretty much every other country who's going to be assessed based on vaccinated travel next year, which may or may not get pushed out beyond the first quarter. So why, I guess, give that sort of hope with Australia that's not really there?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, I think what we want to do is see where we are—both countries, and states within Australia—on vaccination rates in eight weeks' time. It's, to us, appropriate to continue to review it. Obviously, what we have at the moment in Australia is certainly, in at least a couple of states, uncontrolled outbreaks, and in another one, one that they're struggling to control. And so for now we think this is the appropriate position to be in. But let's see where we are in eight weeks. But I take the point that you're making, which is that, you know, we'd be standing here today right now, somewhat unlikely that in November we would make a quick decision. But, you know, we want to continue to have the ability to assess it.

Media: And in terms of that first quarter of next year, have any more recent sort of assessments been done by Cabinet around how likely that's looking given this Delta outbreak?

Hon Grant Robertson: For the bubble?

Media: For the vaccinated travel that was—

Hon Grant Robertson: Oh, I see what you mean.

Media: —done in terms of the reconnecting.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, look, I mean, that plan remains the plan but we, as has been suggested in the last week or two, continue to update and look at that in the light of vaccination programmes, in particular. And you would have heard the Prime Minister say yesterday that we've got ongoing work under way around the framework that we're going to be using over the next period. So we're still working towards the first part of next year for that plan but we're constantly looking at it and thinking about how it might be tweaked.

Media: And just one very last clarification, I promise: the red flights, the two that ran already in September—or one's running this week—with Sydney to Auckland, so—because the press release and you're talking about Australia as a whole, are you suggesting that people who are stuck outside of New South Wales need to get to Sydney, which sounds like a ludicrous idea?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, I think that will be a challenge for those people, but that is something we're going to be working through with authorities and with Air New Zealand. So I—

Media: So you are asking people to go to Sydney, basically?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, as I say, that's something we're going to be working through. It is, obviously, a significant challenge for people to be able to get from outside of Sydney into Sydney. But for now those red flights have come from Sydney, that's correct.

Media: [Cross-talk]

Hon Grant Robertson: We'll just take Ben because I know it will be about Australia.

Media: Yes, the great country of Australia! The key question remains, I think the same one as yesterday: will you assess states state by state or the whole country? Because if you're going to do it the whole country, that's, effectively, the ballgame, because New South Wales' cases are going to remain in that red zone, aren't they?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, so, I mean, that's, I guess, was part of what I was answering to Jo—was that one of the things that we might be able to assess as we move forward is whether we could return to a state-by-state approach. As I said yesterday, I think, that's not on the cards at the moment, because—

Media: Possibly in eight weeks?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, the thing is that's one of the reasons to keep the eight-week process going. But, you know, I take the point that is being made here that sitting here from the perspective of today, it doesn't feel like a very likely outcome that we would start again in eight weeks, but we want to make sure that we've got the ability to reassess it then.

Media: In the months leading up to the original opening in April, there was months and months and months of the Prime Minister, everyone from Government, saying, "We want to do this—we want to do this." Now you've done it, it was tortured, and Kiwis have actually given their feedback on it—I think it was 27 percent of people think it was the right thing to do to open. Does that influence you? Do you want to open up as much as you did prior to April?

Hon Grant Robertson: The decisions we make about everything in COVID are led by a health response and a health approach. Bear in mind, in the early part of this year, we weren't discussing Delta; we were discussing a different environment, and, as Dr Bloomfield has said from time to time, almost a different virus. We have to look at the situation as it is now as opposed to looking at the situation in April through the lens of as it is now. So my view is that we made the decision on the basis of advice and evidence at the time, now we have a different situation, and we are pushing out for another eight week, and we'll reassess it then.

Media: Are you enthusiastic as you were before? Because, obviously, we've got some holidays coming up, we've got Christmas coming up, hundreds of thousands of Kiwis back at home. Do you have the ambition that they might be able to spend time together at Christmas?

Hon Grant Robertson: It is a very different environment now than the one we were in then. As you know, we have a desire to get New Zealanders vaccinated, and then, once we do that, that opens up a series of options for us. I'm not going to pre-empt any of those today. But the more people we get vaccinated and the quicker we get them vaccinated, the more options open up for us for that period of time.

Media: The *Herald* today launched its 90 percent project for vaccinations. Do you think this is an ambitious target, and what would it take to get there?

Hon Grant Robertson: I'm really excited about anybody who is promoting the idea of New Zealanders getting vaccinated, and as many New Zealanders getting vaccinated as possible. You know that we, as a Government, haven't set a target, and you know the reasons for that. But you have also heard from various modellers in the last few days that 90 percent-plus is of course where we need to aim for—the "plus" being an important part of what those modellers are saying. So I welcome any campaign that will get people motivated to be

vaccinated. And we want to make sure that we get not only the 90 percent, but we get above that as well.

Dr Caroline McElnay: Just to say that the health advice has consistently been as many as possible.

Media: Isn't the health advice 90 percent, though? The director-general said yesterday we need at least 90 percent.

Hon Grant Robertson: "At least" was the very important word in the phrase there, and the director-general—no, and we haven't had a firm piece of advice around a percentage target like that from the director-general. The point he was making was at least 90 percent, and I welcome campaigns that support anybody to get vaccinated.

I'll come back over here.

Media: Minister, do you have any more information about the case that was identified at Middlemore Hospital that was reported yesterday? Have they been linked to the wider outbreak, and, if not, how concerning?

Hon Grant Robertson: I don't believe they have actually been formally linked to the outbreak. Interviews are ongoing at this stage.

Dr Caroline McElnay: Yes. That's right.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, and I think the public health officials continue to believe that they think they will be able to link it to the outbreak, but they haven't been able to do that yet.

Media: And can you clarify, with the truck driver, the associate health minister this morning said that the case was identified through surveillance testing, but yesterday it was reported that they were picked up because they're a contact of an existing case. Can you clarify how exactly they were identified as a case?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Yes, they are a contact of a case. That case was a recently discovered case. That case was symptomatic and this person was then tested as a result of that person having been tested.

Hon Grant Robertson: And I believe, perhaps where some of the confusion may have arisen there was that this person had previously tested earlier on, and so I think that might have been—but the Director of Public Health is correct. It was a contact of an existing case.

I'm just going to go up across the top. Mark.

Media: A clarification about the 10 days, 14 days thing: if someone enters the country, goes into MIQ and on day zero, one tests positive, they go to the Jet Park, they are asymptomatic the entire time, they have to stay there for 14 days. If someone in the community tests positive, they are asymptomatic the entire time, they go to the Jet Park, they have to stay there for just 10 days. Is that right?

Dr Caroline McElnay: For the community cases, they're not subject to the legal framework that is in place for people coming into the country. So it is very much the decision of the medical officer of health, and that assessment is made. If they are deemed to be low risk, as I say at the moment in Auckland in alert level 4, then you're going home to a very safe, contained environment should they be discharged.

Hon Grant Robertson: It is really important to keep reiterating that it's not like a target. It's about the assessment that is made by a clinician dealing with a specific patient, looking at their symptoms, looking at their history, and so while the rules are as they've been explained by Dr McElnay today, these are clinical decisions which bear in mind the health of the person and the safety of the community.

Mark. Sorry, carry on.

Media: It seems like you could have two people with the exact same clinical conditions but one of them will have to stay there for 14 days as a result of having recently entered the country, and someone who was infected in the community could be released after 10 days.

Dr Caroline McElnay: I think when you're dealing with any situation, any case, you have to assess each case on its own merits, and that's why, as the Deputy Prime Minister says, these are clinical decisions that are taken by the medical officer of health—

Hon Grant Robertson: Charlie.

Dr Caroline McElnay: —which they are able to do.

Hon Grant Robertson: Sorry, Dr McElnay.

Media: Just a further clarification on that, you've said 10 days if they're entering level 4 Auckland, but if Auckland's not in level 4, will they stay 14 days?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Well, we're having those discussions with Auckland Regional Public Health as to what—should Auckland move, and we obviously don't know what will happen, but we're talking with them around the implementation of that policy going forward.

Media: So as soon as Auckland moves out of level 4, that will be strengthened, though. Because you introduced 14 days for Delta, you're in the middle of a Delta outbreak. If the level 4 restrictions aren't in place, then it becomes a risk, doesn't it?

Dr Caroline McElnay: We want to make sure that we've got tight management of anyone who might be infectious in the community, and so that's part of the conversation that we would have.

Hon Grant Robertson: I think the bottom line is that this will be subject to further discussions with the Auckland public health authorities.

Sorry, I did say to Charlie. Sorry, Jenna. You've had quite a few.

Media: I'm just very good at throwing my voice.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah. Ha, ha!

Media: So, in terms of just some clarity around the time frame of this truck driver being tested, what was happening in terms of—because, if it was a household contact, would they have been isolating? Can you just outlay the time frame of that person being found and the truck driver being tested and then going off to delivery?

Hon Grant Robertson: I don't have that information with me. I don't know if Dr McElnay does.

Dr Caroline McElnay: Only in that I'm aware that a person in the household was symptomatic and went and got tested, which is exactly what we want to happen. This truck driver was a household member. They too went and got tested at the same time, in advance of actually being told that they were potentially a contact of a case. The results of both came back positive.

Hon Grant Robertson: And, prior to that—some time prior to that—they had been tested independently of all of that, and, obviously, the locations of interest we're dealing with fell in the middle of that time period.

Media: So this isn't a case of them being tested—the household contact—

Hon Grant Robertson: And then going out? No.

Dr Caroline McElnay: No.

Media: Retail banks have been hiking their interest rates because they expect the Reserve Bank to hike rates. But I'm just wondering: are you comfortable with them doing that when, actually, they still have access to a whole lot of cheap funding, partly via the Reserve Bank's Funding for Lending programme?

Hon Grant Robertson: I'm pleased Henry's not here—he wouldn't approve of all of these non-COVID questions! But, at this stage, those are decisions that banks make. We never intervene or interfere in those. They make their judgments built on their assessment of the interest rate environment that they're in. Clearly, the Reserve Bank has not changed its rates, but it would not be unusual for trading banks to predict what they think might happen.

Media: The retail banks have received a whole lot of support over the past year and a half, largely from the Reserve Bank but through a whole bunch of policy measures, which is in the large part good, because we don't want banks to fail, but, you know, they're also now reporting very large profits and hiking these rates ahead of the bank. I mean, is this something you're comfortable with?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, you know, there's always big questions in the public debate about bank profits. What I do know is that, over the course of the last few weeks, I've been in regular contact with banks, and I know, from what they're telling me, that they are treating sympathetically those customers who come to them and ask, for example, for mortgage deferral or other ability to alleviate financial stress. They are continuing to listen to those people and respond to them. And right now, in the middle of this outbreak, that's what I would like them to do.

Media: What were the two unlinked cases reported today? Did they present to Middlemore Hospital last night?

Hon Grant Robertson: I believe that they did, yes. They are one household, and they did present there. It's good that people are coming forward when they're feeling unwell and they're being dealt with there, and obviously it's early days in terms a case investigation and whether they can be linked up.

Media: And to clarify: they have COVID symptoms?

Hon Grant Robertson: I believe they were brought in by a family member, and they were brought in because they were unwell and the testing was done. They were dealt with through protocols as if somebody had COVID when they come in.

Media: Deputy Prime Minister, do you have a message for the community of Timaru, who have been really shaken by the tragic news overnight?

Hon Grant Robertson: Look, it is an absolutely tragic event, and it'll be distressing not only for the people of Timaru but also for the immediate people associated with the family, and so our hearts go out to them. This is a live police investigation; so I'll limit my comments, but other than just to say that the reports I read are tragic and my heart does go out to all those who are around them in their community.

Media: Dr McElnay, have you seen the recommendations from Auckland University that the Ministry of Health needs to start an education campaign about the correct way to use masks, and what do you make of that?

Dr Caroline McElnay: I haven't actually seen that report, but we would certainly concur that wearing a mask, wearing it properly is really important, and my observation of people not wearing them correctly would agree that there may be issues with people not knowing how to wear them. A mask is only as good as you actually wearing it properly—so covering your nose and your mouth. So we'll certainly look at that report and see if there's anything that we can take from that to put into our education campaigns.

Media: What are you seeing in terms of the incorrect use of masks?

Dr Caroline McElnay: I think we're probably all seeing a number of people with masks sitting with their nose not covered, sitting underneath their nose. I'm just scanning to see if anyone's in that situation at the moment! But you do have to cover your nose and your mouth.

Media: These experts though, they're calling on the Ministry of Health as well to put out better guidelines in the light of Delta; they say you haven't done that since Delta came out. They believe everyone at MIQ should be wearing N95 masks, including people in MIQ and

the workers and at borders. And they also say that the ministry should be giving out guidelines that cloth masks need to be at least three layers to do the job properly as well. I mean, is it time for you guys to put out new guidelines, in light of Delta?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Well, we certainly have updated the guidelines and the requirements in the MIQ facilities, and there's an extensive use of N95 masks so that certainly has been done, not just in the light of Delta but in the light of emerging—stronger—information about aerosolisation of the COVID virus. We continue to look at the information that we've got on our websites, and then I think it is important that people wear masks properly, that they do wear them where they're encouraged to wear them, and also it's important that if you're wearing a reusable mask that you do keep it clean.

Media: I apologise for the sensitivities around this, but there have been reports in the media about this family in Timaru who've recently come out of MIQ. Do you have any further information about that?

Hon Grant Robertson: I don't, and, as I said earlier on, the police are still doing their investigations, and, as you would expect in those situations, we don't tend to comment in any detail on that.

Media: How is Auckland tracking in terms of vaccination? The Prime Minister said earlier this week that there was space for 200,000 people to get vaccinated this week, is it on track to hit that target, and what would be your message to Aucklanders?

Hon Grant Robertson: My message to Aucklanders is: get vaccinated. And you've heard from the Prime Minister a couple of times this week, the opportunities to do that, both through booking the vaccines but also through the drive-throughs at the airport and at the Trust Arena.

The numbers I do have is that 73 percent of our eligible population across the country have had their first dose, and with bookings that gets us to 78 percent. We are well on our way here and we need all New Zealanders to take the opportunity to be vaccinated. We do know in alert level 4 we're asking people to stay home. There aren't many reasons that you can leave your home, but one of them is to get vaccinated, and so it's an opportunity for all Aucklanders this weekend to do that.

Media: Do you have any figures specific for Auckland?

Hon Grant Robertson: I don't have any with me today.

Dr Caroline McElnay: And we do have them but I don't have them here. So we can get them.

Hon Grant Robertson: I'm sure we can get them to you.

Media: The National Party is calling for the loss carry-back scheme to be extended. It says it wants to allow losses to be carried four years versus one. What are your thoughts on that?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, it's not something we're considering. When we brought in the loss carry-back scheme, it did not have particularly large take-up from businesses, and so at this stage, it's not in our plan to extend, it's not something I'm hearing a great clamour for from the business community. As we've shown throughout COVID, we'll always adapt and change our policies, but that wasn't one when we put it in place that had great take up.

Media: Can you give us a date when interest deductibility—when the draft of that will be released?

Hon Grant Robertson: Very, very soon. I don't have a specific date, but it's not far away at all.

Media: Can I just get some clarification around what the alert level structure looks like now, and particularly, I guess, with Auckland looking to move down one—is it a case of going from 3 to Delta 2, to normal 2, to Delta 1, and everyone needs to do that, so Auckland would need to do the same? What's progression scale actually look like?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, so obviously the first stage in that is the decision that Cabinet will make on Monday, and if we reconfirm the in-principle decision, it's alert level 3 as we know alert level 3. Whether or not then, if we make good progress, the next move would be Delta 2 or the more traditional 2 is a decision still to be made.

What the Prime Minister was indicating yesterday is that under—with Delta, alert level 2, effectively, has rungs, and the top rung was the one where we had the 50 person limit; we're looking to move that for the rest of New Zealand to 100. We're still a wee way away from a decision we would make about Auckland moving into that. And, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, we want alert level 1 to be alert level 1.

Media: Thank you. So the Privacy Commissioner has today warned that people are getting personal information from paper-based contact tracing systems and using it to breach people's privacy. Does the Government plan to do anything about this—especially considering people more likely to use the paper-based systems are people without smart phones, maybe older people, who are already quite vulnerable to these sorts of things?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, look, that's absolutely something we will be needing to follow up. We encourage businesses and organisations to provide an alternative to scanning, particularly for those who don't have smartphones. We would ask anyone who's providing that to do it in as secure a form as possible—for example, keeping it on the counter or near the counter. But I do think it's worth us following up to see whether we need to issue any further guidelines on that.

Media: Do you have any idea of the scale of the demand for the emergency red flights from Australia?

Hon Grant Robertson: I'm trying to recall how many people were on the last one that we did. 93—thank you. Actually, I'm not sure if it was quite that many in the end. I think 93 might have been booked but not all of them showed up.

Media: But, obviously, are you getting a lot more, sort of, applications from people coming forward, and can you give, sort of, an idea of what the threshold is for people to get on that flight?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah. So those red zone flights—the eligibility criteria: you've got to be a New Zealand citizen or hold a residence-class visa. You need to have last departed New Zealand after 5 April, and there can be relevant family members of those listed. It does need to be in the category of being an emergency situation. Obviously, being very specific about that criteria is hard, because everybody's got their own versions of an emergency, but I don't believe—I haven't heard any examples of people feeling that they fall just a little outside the emergency. But it does have to be that you can't continue to look after yourself in a way that is appropriate in Sydney.

Media: In what format or how did you reach the trans-Tasman bubble? Because Government spokespeople said that would be reviewed next week. Was that a meeting with Cabinet?

Hon Grant Robertson: Sorry, what was that?

Media: How did you make the decision on the trans-Tasman bubble?

Hon Grant Robertson: It was one of our delegated Cabinet Ministers' meetings.

Media: When was that?

Hon Grant Robertson: I believe it was Wednesday or Thursday. One of the reasons that we're announcing it today, firstly, is to allow people to participate in it next week. We've also, just over the last couple of days, been working with Air New Zealand particularly on making sure there are flights that are available for people to book and therefore be able to participate. So there was just a little bit of work being done on that in the last 24 hours or so.

Media: Can I also ask: is New Zealand inclined to take up the Chinese invitation to join the CPTPP?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, we're already in it.

Media: Let China in—apologies.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah. Look, I mean, we welcome any countries wanting to join in a high-functioning trade agreement. It's not just China who's expressed interest in this; other countries have in the past. This, as you know, is a very solid regional agreement that New Zealand exporters benefit from, and anything we can do to enhance a rules-based trade system around the world we're always happy to look at. Any country wanting to join the CPTPP obviously has to sign up to the rules within it.

Media: What did you make of the timing of that letter to Damien O'Connor?

Hon Grant Robertson: I don't make anything of it at all.

Media: Do you think that New Zealand was asked because we're a soft touch to China?

Hon Grant Robertson: No, not at all. I think that is both a mischaracterisation of New Zealand and also probably a lack of appreciation of the place of the CPTPP. It's a trade agreement that many countries around the world are interested in.

Media: Do you think it is not connected to August at all?

Hon Grant Robertson: Sorry, Ben, we'll just carry on. We're going to give everyone a go, though, eh? We'll just give everyone a go. No, I don't think it is. We'll just give everyone a go.

Media: There was a case yesterday at Middlemore, a hospital patient who tested positive, and there was no link at the time, I think. Has there been a link established for that?

Hon Grant Robertson: That was the answer I just gave before. So that is still being worked on at the moment.

Media: I guess just building on that, the fact that there's lack of clarity around that and a lot of other—like, 13 unlinked cases in the past 14 days and still exposure events with yesterday's cases. I guess, how safe is it, really, to go to level 3 next week for Auckland?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, we'll listen to the advice of our public health officials about that when they come forward, but the decision we took to make the in-principle decision was one that was based on the advice that we got. As Dr McElnay has already said today, cautious optimism is the phrase not only used by Dr McElnay but used by the Auckland Regional Public Health as well. Do you want to say anything there about that?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Only that the numbers do vary, because when we get a case in that we can't automatically link, there's an intense investigation that Auckland Regional Public Health undertake and we at the ministry support, and we do establish those links, and then we wait to see what the next number of cases are. We're actively working on that, and we have reduced the number of unlinked cases right down. I think the latest that I saw this morning was eight unlinked cases. So it's a moveable feast.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, it just keeps moving. That's the point, is that we get—yeah.

Dr Caroline McElnay: It does move, and we keep updating it. What we will be doing as part of our advice—we'll be looking at what that tells us, what the pattern is. We won't just look at one particular day but we'll look at what the pattern has been and what it's telling us, and that's what I meant by my earlier comment about we've got a cautious optimism that, actually, the vast majority of this outbreak has been contained. We're just seeing a small number of cases coming through. We are able to link them, in the majority, and we actively follow up those that we can't. So that is giving us some cause for optimism.

Media: Nine of the 15 cases yesterday were out in the community. Were they not close contacts of cases that were like—how were they not isolated already. Why are they in the community?

Dr Caroline McElnay: Because we're still finding a very small number of new cases. When we follow up those new cases, that's where we can immediately find connections. But because those people weren't aware that they were a case or that they were a contact, they may have been out in the community. In Auckland what we're seeing by the sorts of exposures are the things that people are doing routinely, like going to the supermarket under level 4 lockdown. So that explains why. It is something we always want to make sure, is that people who have been asked to stay in isolation are actually following the rules, and we haven't got any information that they're not doing that.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, and I think that's the point. Obviously, if someone's a household contact they're going to know and they're going to know that they're isolated. We don't necessarily identify every single contact straight away, and then when we do we sometimes find somebody who's had a contact for a fully legitimate reason. What I want to reinforce is we're seeing very little of the kind of people just getting out and about behaviour by and large. As the Director of Public Health has said, it's just people going about their business. It's just the sequencing of being identified isn't always linear, you know, you have to go backwards sometimes.

Media: What is the average time of contact tracing at the moment?

Hon Grant Robertson: Oh, I'm not sure. I haven't got those numbers—

Dr Caroline McElnay: We can get you those numbers, but—

Media: Is it within the 48 hours—

Dr Caroline McElnay: —our metrics are very good. Our metrics are very good in terms of the identification of the case, the follow up of the case, and then the identification of those contacts. But, for example, when we have a case like the case that presented at Middlemore—becomes a new case, they've already got contacts who up until the point that the case went to hospital, weren't aware that they were contacts of a case. So that's where when we look back at what they've been doing in the previous 48 hours, they will have had some exposures.

Media: I guess the connecting question is: are contact tracers working fast enough so that we're getting to people before they're getting out into the community?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yes, and I think we can say with some certainty that that is mostly—I can't say 100 percent the case. At the beginning of the outbreak when we had very, very large numbers of cases, it was obviously putting a strain on our ability to meet our metrics, but as we're coming down to these smaller number of cases then we're much more in a position to be able to do that.

Media: Then shouldn't it be 100 percent because we're dealing with smaller metrics?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, just every now and then something pops up that you can't—I'm just trying to make sure I don't say it's everyone and then you'll no doubt come to me with one where it's not, so I just want to make sure we cover that,

Media: Mine is just more of a generic question.

Hon Grant Robertson: We'll go to—Benedict was waving his hand, but he may have given up? Charlie, Maiki, and then we might finish. He just gave up at the end there.

Media: Just on testing numbers. They've been slowly declining, they tend to drop off at the weekend. What do you need to see in terms of testing numbers from Auckland over the weekend to give you comfort on Monday to move alert levels?

Hon Grant Robertson: Oh, I'm not sure that that specific number will be a major consideration. But overall, vaccination rate increases have been good. What I would say is

this weekend represents a really great opportunity for Aucklanders to get out and be vaccinated. You know, all things going well, we'll confirm our decision for them to go to alert level 3. And maybe a way of thinking about what we hope will be their final weekend in alert level 4 is to use it to take up one of the many, many spots that are available. We've got the buses going out, we've got community testing centres open—oh, sorry, community vaccination centres open. You know, there is no limit on people to go out to get vaccinated in Auckland this weekend.

Media: My question was testing, though, not the vaccinations.

Hon Grant Robertson: Oh, was it testing? Sorry. I want to talk about vaccination, I don't want to talk about anything else!

Media: That was really helpful, but not the answer.

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, you know, it's Public Service announcement day. Apologies. So say it again Charlie, and we'll just pretend that never happened, that last bit!

Media: Testing numbers tend to drop off, but what do you need to see from Aucklanders, you know, to give you some comfort on Monday that there isn't any cases lurking around in the community?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, testing numbers are very important when we make our decision about alert level changes. Ah, look, we do, obviously, want to see testing rates continue, and they have been very good through this week. The call that we've had by naming the suburbs that we did has borne fruit and we're seeing more people testing in those suburbs. And so want to see a continuation of the very solid trends we have. We don't set a number on it, but we do want to make sure that it stays high.

Media: Have you received any advice from Treasury or anyone in regards to whether the Debt Management Office needs to increase its debt issuance forecast in light of the Delta?

Hon Grant Robertson: I have not had any advice about that at all. I'll just take Maiki and Jenny—Jenna. I need a cup of coffee.

Media: Just a question, Deputy Prime Minister—obviously, we're nearing the end of Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori, so I wonder what your words of encouragement, advice, are to all New Zealanders to keep up the momentum of te reo Māori for the rest of the year?

Hon Grant Robertson: Āe, so kia kaha te reo Māori for the whole year. It's been a really good Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori from my point of view. I've observed a lot more people having a go. As I've said before, if a guy from the South Island who grew up with very little te reo Māori around me can try and get it wrong and see people wince at my pronunciation every now and then, I think everyone should have a go, and the more you speak, the better you get and the better it is for making sure we reach that big goal we've got of a million New Zealanders being able to have a conversation in te reo Māori by 2040. So I say well done to everybody who's had a go—still a couple more days to have a go—and I really appreciate the effort that's been made. We'll go—

Media: Can I just supp off that before you switch topics?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, sure, and we'll finish with Jenna.

Media: Because you obviously spent a lot of time before Waitangi this year working towards your incredibly fluent—that's not a thing; anyway—speech up there, I'm just wondering whether that journey has continued for you since then, or was that something you were concentrating on over summer because you had that to do at Waitangi?

Hon Grant Robertson: It would be fair to say that I put a lot of effort in leading into Waitangi Day, but I continue to try and use te reo Māori in my everyday life now. I do need to practise if I'm going to do three or four minutes in te reo Māori without notes, but, like a lot of people, I try and use words and phrases in my daily life, and I'll keep doing that. But it's a big

journey for all of us but, I hope, one that everybody appreciates the opportunity to take up. Finish with Jenna.

Media: When it comes to your alert level decision on Monday, will it come into your thinking how Aucklanders are feeling about being in level 4 for so long and whether they can actually withstand any more of that? People are getting pretty itchy up there. And are you concerned that people are going to start flouting the rules if you do keep them in level 4 too long?

Hon Grant Robertson: The first thing to say is we always make our decision on the basis of public health advice, and that is what guides our decision, but we absolutely appreciate the fact that Aucklanders have been through five weeks of this, and it is hard. And we understand that and we thank Aucklanders for what they have done for us. We made our call on Monday at Cabinet to announce an in-principle decision because the advice we were getting was that public health felt that we were controlling the outbreak. You've heard again from Dr McElroy today that there continues to be cautious optimism about that. So we'll take the advice on Monday, but we have made that in-principle decision, and we want Aucklanders to know how much we appreciate what they've done.

Media: Someone's written in and said that, "New cases pop up all the time with most of us stuck at home. We're over it and we're losing faith." What do you say to them?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, I say to that person: keep the faith, that what we've done in New Zealand and particularly in Auckland under alert level 4 has worked. Just take a look at examples close to home, across the Ditch, where case numbers have gone much, much, much higher than they have here. The sacrifice Aucklanders have made at alert level 4 has absolutely been worth it. Keep the faith, and we'll come back to you on Monday with our decision. Have a good weekend, everyone.

conclusion of press conference