

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. Good afternoon. As you can see, I'm joined by Deputy Prime Minister, Grant Robertson, who will shortly outline the economic support in place as we transition into the new COVID protection system, one where, at every state, all businesses are able to remain open and to operate. But first I'll give a short update on the Omicron situation before moving to decisions by Cabinet on the different parts of the traffic light system that the country will move into on Friday.

At this stage, we have no cases of the Omicron variant in New Zealand, but the developing global situation shows us why our approach of ongoing caution at the border is needed. Over the weekend, we took immediate steps to designate nine countries as very high risk, restricting the people who can travel to New Zealand to citizens only, and requiring them to stay in MIQ for the full 14 days and undergo five tests over that time.

Omicron is a reminder of why we need a response that lasts and carries us through this pandemic. Some countries have had to close borders or stand up quarantine facilities again. We already had a strong system in place, and the ability to move swiftly to make it stronger still. This is a reminder of the risk that still exists at our border. We are not powerless, though.

There is a lot of evidence that needs to be gathered yet before we'll know the full impact of this variant. Already, you can see that the international community is working closely and quickly to determine what risk this variant poses. It may impact on our vaccines, but it may not; it may be more severe or it may be more mild than Delta—we simply do not know yet. So the most important thing we can do is, firstly, use our border system to try and stop cases from entering the community, and we're doing that; use public health settings as an extra layer of protection, which is exactly what the COVID protection framework does; and, finally, keep vaccinating.

To that end, Omicron has not changed the advice on boosters, which are now available to anyone six months or more past their second dose. To keep it simple, boosters are available to everyone, but we're especially keen to see our border and health workers receiving this additional protection, and those who may be more vulnerable, like our over-65-year-olds. I encourage you to book today, or visit one of our many vaccination sites.

Now, to today's Cabinet decisions. This week, we begin the transition into a new and safer way of operating, and we can do so with confidence. That's because we've come through the past two years of COVID in better shape than many other places in the world. We have had amongst the lowest case rates, hospitalisations, and death rates in the OECD. Where many other places saw their life expectancy shortened, ours is amongst three where it has increased. As we head into the next phase, we do so with amongst the highest vaccination levels against COVID-19, too. The past three months have been hard, though—the hardest, perhaps, we've faced in the pandemic so far—but the sacrifice of so many has had an enormous impact. We've avoided the exponential increase of cases that we saw in Sydney and Melbourne. We've dramatically increased vaccination rates, and we've done so with good spread across the country.

But that does not mean it's time to lift all restrictions, as some countries have. We want to implement a system that will serve us well and last the distance. The alert levels did that for 20 months, and now it's time for the COVID protection framework, or the traffic lights, to do the heavy lifting. This new system does not represent a considerable loosening of protection. What it does mean is using everything we have learnt so far and the tools we know make a difference. It's careful and it's cautious, but it also gives greater certainty for businesses.

So let's come, then, to where each district will move to as we kick off this new way of doing things. Vaccination rates are one of the key factors we considered when setting a region's colour in the new traffic light system. But we also considered the following: capacity of the health and disability system in a region; testing, contact tracing, and case management

capabilities; transmission of COVID-19 within the community, the number of cases in regions, and how they're spreading; and the impact the virus might have on vulnerable populations.

As we step into the framework for the first time, the way we use this criteria has been different to the way that we will apply it in the future. We have been cautious, and that's because we want to carefully transition, without seeing cases take off. And so today, having weighed these factors up, I can confirm the following regions will move in at red this Friday: Northland, Auckland, Taupō and Rotorua Lakes Districts, Kawerau, Whakatāne, and Opōtiki Districts, Gisborne District, Wairoa District; Rangitīkei, Whanganui, and Ruapehu Districts. The rest of the North Island will move in at orange. The whole of the South Island will also move in at orange. These settings will be in place for the next two weeks.

Cabinet will review settings again and provide an update before the summer break on Monday, 13 December. We will then hold for roughly a month to allow us to see the impact of the shifts and allow the settings to bed in. They'll then be reviewed again in the week of Monday, 17 January. From there, we'll get into a regular routine of reviewing settings on a fortnightly basis.

With this initial designation, a key consideration has been vaccination levels. All of the districts listed today have done an amazing job reaching into their communities, but still have double-dose rates in the 70 percent range for the eligible population. We know the higher the vaccination levels, the greater protection. Our hope is that we will continue to see a lift in rates over the next fortnight, when we come to consider settings again in a few weeks.

But now that we have set where districts will enter, what do they each mean? There are three key things to remember at every colour setting: one, download your vaccine pass and have it ready to use so you can keep going to your favourite places; two, take your mask wherever you go, and be ready to wear it; and, three, just like before, scan in wherever you go. So that's mask, scan, and pass.

At orange, the big change here for parts of the country that will enter into this setting is that for the vaccinated and where vaccine passes are used, there are no gathering limits. People can gather again, safely.

At red, it will feel a lot like level 2. Your vaccine pass lets you go everywhere, but number limits of 100 will apply to most activities, and, importantly—because I know this is a question many Aucklanders have—you can now see family and friends again in their homes, and use the bathroom inside. Luxury! If you are unvaccinated, you can gather with others, but the gathering limits are lower across each of the levels.

So, as you can see, for the vast majority of New Zealanders, with your My Vaccine Pass, life will feel a lot like it did before. For the unvaccinated, it will be more restricted. That is the best way that we can ensure that the unvaccinated are protected, too.

For more general information on the framework, head to the Unite against COVID-19 website at covid19.govt.nz.

Advice for business is live on business.govt.nz. We also want to make sure that we answer any question that business may have as quickly as we can. Please, if you have a question, do call 0800 424 946.

Having a vaccine pass is key under the framework, so if you haven't got yours yet, go to mycovidrecord.health.nz, or you can phone 0800 222 478 to request a physical copy.

We know that there are some who don't have the ability to access their pass online. If you or anyone you know needs support, you can, as well as calling the 0800 number, also visit a pharmacy that is currently offering vaccines. These same pharmacies will be able to print out your COVID pass for you.

Finally, as we enter this next phase in our response to COVID, I want to say thank you. Every New Zealander has played a part in our world-leading response. A year and a half ago, as we moved out of our first lockdown, I liken that point in our COVID journey as being halfway

down Everest, knowing we had to keep moving safely through a perilous descent, and it has been perilous.

After a sustained period of being open, the Delta variant finally arrived. No country it has entered has been able to get rid of it so far, and it now accounts for 99.7 percent of all cases worldwide. And so while it hasn't been possible to eliminate Delta this time, New Zealand did something truly remarkable in managing to keep Delta suppressed while we got our population vaccinated, getting 2.2 million people vaccinated in just the past 100 days. There are 160,889 Kiwis now due for a second dose. If everyone got it this week, we would be at 89.3 percent fully vaccinated. That would be remarkable and such a gift to the team of 5 million.

And so, finally, as we enter the next phase, the same thing that was important two years ago remains so still: please be kind. Be kind to yourself. It's been a hard and stressful year. Be kind to each other. Everyone—and I mean everyone—is doing their best. There will be challenges ahead. We will continue to see cases, and in places we haven't so far, but we will get through, just like we did last time and just like we will this time, together.

Look, I will now hand over to Minister Robertson, who will make announcements relating to economic support during this next phase.

Hon Grant Robertson: Thank you, Prime Minister. Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou katoa. Firstly, I want to acknowledge that this outbreak has been hard on businesses and workers around the country, and in particular in Auckland, Waikato, and Northland. Operating with the restrictions in place under the alert legal system has been tough, but those restrictions have helped keep the outbreak under control, and I want to thank everyone for their support in this.

The Government has provided more than \$6 billion of support to businesses since 17 August through the wage subsidy and resurgence support payments. As we move into the new traffic light system, almost all businesses will now be able to operate, but the Government is aware that some support may still be needed as we transition into that framework. That's why Cabinet has agreed to a new transition payment for affected businesses, which will be mostly those in Auckland, Waikato, and Northland. The one-off transition payment will be activated through the Resurgence Support Payment system, using the same criteria, and will be available from 10 December. The period to assess affected revenue will be between 3 October and 9 November 2021. This covers a period when Northland, Auckland, and Waikato were all in alert level 3 at various points.

The payment is at a higher per-business rates than the current RSP, which will be \$4,000, plus \$400 per FTE, up to a maximum of 50 FTEs, and, therefore, a maximum payment of \$24,000. The Treasury has estimated that the likely total cost of this payment will be between \$350 and \$490 million.

As I said last month when we announced the framework, we are moving away from the broad-based economic supports such as the wage subsidy scheme and the Resurgence Support Payment that have been provided under the alert level system. This is because at all levels of the new framework, most businesses will be able to operate.

It is worth noting that this transition payment is in addition to the final wage subsidy and resurgence support payments, which opened for application on Friday. These will continue to be open for application and we'll still pay out, even though we are moving to the new framework and even though a small amount of the period for the revenue drop for them will be under the new framework. As we move through the transition period, we will monitor any economic impacts that the system is having on businesses, and I will report back to Cabinet in early 2022 on this and make recommendations for any further support as is necessary.

To be clear about this, if it is deemed that there is further necessary targeted support, it would only be available under the red setting of the new system. As we indicated in October, under orange and green we will not be providing the widespread economic supports that we have in the past—that is, beyond the leave support scheme and the short-term absence payment. On those, I can confirm that they will be available to support those who need to self-isolate,

including when waiting for test results—as they do now—at every level of the new framework. We are refining the system for these payments, including moving to a weekly basis for calculation, reflecting the new isolation periods. Before the end of the year, we will also confirm the support that will be available in the event of any localised lockdowns.

As we assess the impact of the framework, we remain aware that there are particular sectors that continue to be impacted by COVID-19. It's worth noting that the Small Business Cashflow (Loan) Scheme remains in operation, and we are looking, again, at whether it needs to be tweaked to provide appropriate support going forward.

In terms of other support, the \$60 million package for business advice and mental health support to help Auckland businesses through this transition period that we announced late last month is being rolled out, and, as we have previously stated, if the business advice elements of this package are oversubscribed, we will look to expand it to meet demand.

Finally, I want to note that the Activate Tāmaki Makaurau website was launched on 17 November, providing information and links to business supports. We have been in discussion with Auckland businesses and their representatives and the Auckland Council about this programme, and we will have more to say later in the week about how we can support it.

Back to you, Prime Minister.

PM: Thank you, Deputy Prime Minister. I'll now just ask Dr Bloomfield to join us on the podium for any questions.

Jenna, and then Barry, then Jessica.

Media: Prime Minister, what hope do red regions have of spending their summer in orange?

PM: The first thing I would point out is that for those districts who are moving into red, it will feel very similar to what they're experiencing now, with the addition of vaccine passes. So very similar levels of protections, but the addition of vaccine passes to, in the end, give us that extra tool to make sure that we're protecting people now that we have vaccinations in place. We are reviewing in two weeks' time, and we will do that in an open-minded way, looking again at whether or not we're seeing a lift in vaccination rates, alongside considering all of those other health factors.

Media: But the regions that you have in red at the moment include Gisborne and Northland, the home of the festivals. So did you, basically, just kill Rhythm and Vines?

PM: Ultimately, those decisions will be for those festivals. We recognise that we have set in place settings for the next two weeks. If they make a decision that they will be unable to go ahead, it is one of the reasons that we did put in place a transition support regime, knowing that this period is difficult for those festival organisers, and knowing that they may need extra support as we go through this transition.

Media: What would be your advice for them, looking at the current settings?

PM: Ultimately, I can't make a commercial decision, but what we have been able to do is give them the best possible chance to push out that decision making and offer them some support for costs that cannot be recovered.

Media: Yeah, but the concern there is that that two-week check-in, I guess, is quite hard for them.

PM: And the entire reason we set up that transition support was because we recognised as we move into this framework over summer there would be uncertainty. There will be some a little further out that will be able to see a pathway for them. There are festivals in the South that will, for instance, be able to go ahead. But in some regions we are in a transition where there is uncertainty, and that's what that support mechanism is all about.

Yeah, Barry, and then Jessica.

Media: Prime Minister, a number of the areas that are going into alert level—oh, sorry, traffic light red have no COVID at all—

PM: Yeah.

Media: Do you have a message for those people who may be frustrated in those areas?

PM: I don't think that the regions that are moving will necessarily be surprised. We have indicated very strongly that one of the central decision-making factors for us would be vaccination rates, because, as you can see, yes, there will be regions that are free of COVID now, but we are seeing the odd case being seeded, despite all the protections that are in place. So these are preventative measures. We've indicated that as we step into the new framework, ease the Auckland boundary, we will be making decisions that are very cautious through that period.

Media: Are more police being laid on to monitor these regions that are in traffic light red now?

PM: A very important point to make here is that there are no hard borders, with the exception of the Auckland boundary. So, as you know, that changes through December. Requirements around testing and vaccination for those exiting Auckland stay in place till the middle of January, but, other than that, there are no hard borders in this traffic light system, and so people will be moving. As for enforcement and compliance, yes, we want to make sure that we're supporting businesses as they check vaccine passes and so on, but it will be different to the border-based compliance you've seen so far.

Media: So you're saying there is no need to police it?

PM: No. No, that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying the policing will be around supporting compliance at venues, ensuring that they are able to operate the vaccine pass checks safely. It won't be congregating around borders, because the border that still exists is the Auckland one. There aren't others.

Media: Prime Minister, you say you're taking a cautious and careful approach. Is that fair, though, given how vaccinated we are and where we are—you know, we're almost two years in, dealing with this now?

PM: I think one of the advantages that we have as a country is that, by and large, we do have quite good spread of our vaccine uptake. You can see how critical that is when you look overseas. In some places, it may look like they have high vaccination rates, but if you have even one region where it dips a bit lower, that runs the risk of seeing outbreaks. We want to continue to drive up the vaccine we have right across the country to reduce the risk of outbreaks. This new COVID protection framework, its use of vaccine passes, will actually help us lift vaccine rates as well as help protect us.

Media: Are you concerned, though, that you'll be creating a divide where you've got a whole region held back by a few pockets of people who don't want to get vaccinated, and is that concerning for you?

PM: With the exception of Auckland, at the moment, the whole country is in level 2. On Friday those regions that move to red, it will feel very similar, except now with vaccine passes. So those vaccine passes add extra protection, but the idea of it being heavily restricted I really push back on. For the most part, people in red will have a very similar feeling to they do now.

Sorry, I'll just canvass around. Yeah, I'll come to—yeah, Jane.

Media: Can you speak to potential vulnerabilities, please, in the different shift to home isolation? For example—so, a couple of cases—someone traveling on flight to get to Christchurch and then testing positive, but also the report with people isolating at home and critical about preventable deaths. Can you just talk people through what the difference is going to look like, and what support they're going to have in this new framework?

PM: So I'll cast forward to the arrangements if someone finds themselves infected with COVID-19 away from their home, and then I'll ask Dr Bloomfield to speak to some of the general questions that you've put. So, for the most part—even if someone is found to have COVID-19 away from their usual place of residence, for the most part people will have a place that they can isolate. Regardless, the public health unit will talk with that individual and work through whether or not they can continue to isolate in the place that they are currently resident in at that time. If they need extra supports to isolate somewhere else, the public health unit is able to work that through with them.

Dr Bloomfield?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So two things to add to that. The first is you referred to the case we've got in Christchurch, where this was actually a whānau that had finished their seven days in managed isolation and were completing the self-isolation at home, and on day nine, one of them returned a positive test. Remember, for all domestic travel in the country—air travel—there are already a number of precautions in place, including mask use, and, of course, from mid-December, the requirement for everybody to be fully vaccinated or have been tested. So there's a high level of protection for people on those flights anyway, so we're not worried about a high risk there from people moving around.

The second is: what can people expect when they're being looked after, or self-isolating at home, and, yes, you referred to the report that's been released today, and—just to add to the apology that's already been made and to reiterate that—what it's shown is ways that we can improve the system, and that has already happened. But, secondly, the report, which is very good, refers to the fact that our information systems across different parts of the health system do not link up. Now, I've worked 30 years in the health system and that's been a holy grail to make that happen, and one of the things that is happening to support managed isolation in the home setting, or isolation at home, is that these information systems are being linked up across primary care, hospital, Healthline, and so on so that whoever is doing the check-in with people has access to all the relevant information, and that's a huge improvement on the system.

Media: But do you think people are ready for a much more light touch, I suppose, from public health as there are more cases out there—you know, people isolating at home without that direct contact. Do you think people are aware of that and are ready for that along with more COVID cases actually in the community, and, potentially, people are travelling around while positive?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So let me be clear: there will still be regular contact from either Healthline or from public health. Likewise—as is happening now, where we're seeing cases in the regions outside of Auckland—there is very active follow-up, contact tracing, isolation, and support of people.

PM: Jane, just on the idea of people moving around whilst positive, before they exit MIQ they have to return a negative test. So that, I think, is really critical to point out—that on exit, people are returning negative tests.

Media: I want to just talk about the community cases—you know, you said that, for example, if someone was positive away from home, there'd be a discussion, but—

PM: When I say “a discussion”, that does not mean that someone is going to take a flight to go back to their home—of course not. But if someone is isolating in a place which is not fit for purpose, then there would be a discussion around whether or not they can safely relocate to another place without exposing others.

I would disagree about the idea of a light touch. We are still maintaining a “minimise and protect”. We don't have a tolerance of COVID in our community. It is why we still are isolating close contacts. It's why we're still having household contacts remain at home. It's why we're still cautious at our border. We are maintaining some of those core fundamental tools that will reduce people's potential exposure to COVID-19.

I'll just—

Media: Can I get a quick follow on that? Dr Bloomfield, two weeks ago you said that the home isolation programme was “working well”. Why did you tell the public that when a review into two deaths paints a very worrying picture about poor and delayed clinical oversight?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: In fact, the report also reiterates that for many people, the system has been working well and continues to improve. The reason the review was done was because there had been these two deaths of people who were isolating at home alone. This is very appropriate. We do this in hospitals where for every death in hospital, there's a review to see what can be learnt; what improvements can be made. In this case, it was identified that there were slip-ups in the system and things that could have been done better, and that the deaths were potentially preventable. Improvements have been made so that the system is working even better for people.

Media: It's more than a slip-up, couldn't you say—preventable deaths, potentially?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: As I've said, the report found that the deaths were potentially preventable, and the point of doing the review is to find out exactly where were the areas that need to be strengthened and improved, and those improvements have been put in place.

PM: Sorry, I'll come to Luke, then Jason, then Henry.

Media: Prime Minister, when you announced a couple of weeks ago that today we'd be learning about alert—the new settings, you said you would outline some of the conditions around when parts of the country could go into green. I was hoping you'd give some details.

PM: Yeah, and so, look, obviously we've said that through this transition period we don't have an expectation that parts of the country will be in green, and that's because we are in a stage where we're seeing, over a period, cautiously, a change in the way that the Auckland boundary will work, a shift into the new framework, and some changes to our other settings. So we want to step through that cautiously, in the same way that previously when we've had changes, we've made sure that we have public health settings in the rest of the country that act preventatively, that in case we have cases there, we're in the best possible position to manage them. That's the reason that we will have all parts of the country either in orange or red through that period.

In terms of—

Media: Yeah, no, I understand that. I understand that, but you said you'd outline—

PM: Beyond that? It will be the same criteria that I've set out. We'll be looking at the transmission of any given outbreak at any given time, the pressure on the public health system, our ability to continue to contact trace successfully, any pressure on the hospital system from those cases, and, of course, ongoing surveillance of vaccination rates, although once you've reach those rates, then, obviously, you expect them to only get better.

Media: So, for example, if the South Island continues to have not many cases, when you're checking in again on 17 January, there's a handful of cases down there, would they be looking at green?

PM: They're doing everything right. The issue for the South Island is less about what they have done or their circumstances and more about the fact that the country is transitioning right now, and through that transition we need to make sure that we're cautious.

Media: I get that, but what I'm trying to get at is at what point can people have a sense that they might go green/

PM: The point I'm making is that, as I've said, the way we've applied the criteria in these initial decisions is different. So, in fact, the South Island has done exactly what they need to. It's more the fact that we've transitioning into the new framework—that is the reason that they are in orange, and, over time, we would likely see that change.

I think I said Jason, and then Henry, didn't I?

Media: To be quite clear, are you telling New Zealand that there's going to be no one in green before the new year?

PM: Yeah, we're saying over the summer period, through this transition, because, keep in mind, the Auckland boundary only lifts in the middle of December. So we do expect that the country will either be in orange or red settings through that period.

Media: And can you explain the Cabinet's rationale in terms of what might happen for a region to go the other way—for example, to go from orange back to red? Is that something that can happen, and what would need to happen for that—

PM: Yes—I mean, I don't see that in the next two weeks that would be likely because, of course, vaccination rates won't go backwards. But the thing that would be a factor for us is if we saw, for instance, an outbreak that was growing at a rate that looked like it may potentially put pressure on contact tracing, on our hospital or healthcare system, and so on.

Media: And also, finally, on the Waikato, that's from the graph that you've sent out—that is in the orange setting, or it will be. There are still confirmed cases within the community in that region. Could you explain your rationale—

PM: Correct, but, actually, what this framework does at orange is put greater protections in place by using vaccine passes, so it's actually a greater level of protection than necessarily what you are seeing now, and they have been operating at quite some time, keeping in check an outbreak that continues to be linked. It just happens to have a long tail. Equally, you can see that the vaccination rates are really solid in that region, as well.

I said that I would come to Henry.

Media: Due to the 70 percents for double vaccination rates for 12 plus, you're talking about those—

PM: For many of those districts, that's right.

Media: And Tai Rāwhiti's the highest, with 78 percent double doses. Are you saying that, basically, if they reach 80, it's probably orange, given there's no cases there, if things kind of remain stable, as they are? And also, some South Island areas are below that. Westland is below that. So are they just a bit of a [*Inaudible*] because they can be over—

PM: So two things there. Firstly, vaccination has been a significant factor, but not the only one, and what I would say about the South Island is, yes, there are pockets of the South Island in some districts that have had slightly lower rates, keeping in mind that my recollection is for the West Coast, they're some 500 doses shy of hitting some of their targets for first doses. So their population base, obviously, being smaller has an impact there. But the other factor to keep in mind is that for the change, the movement, across the country, we have the ability to check every single person is either double vaccinated or tested before they're going into the South Island, so we've factored that in as well.

Media: Prime Minister, a follow-up—

PM: Yeah, I'll let you finish.

Media: In the 70s range, basically, where [*Inaudible*] an orange—

PM: As I've said, it's one of the factors, and it has been a significant one for this first decision. It won't be the only one as we go into the—after that next two weeks. But for those parts of the country that do want to see an alert—a setting change before Christmas, then I would encourage everyone to work really hard on vaccination rates.

Yeah, Jenna, and then Jessica, and then I'll come back over here.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, how concerned are you if Omicron does get into New Zealand, and what further—

PM: Sorry—Tova, not Jenna.

Media: —restrictions would you—same, same—and what further restrictions would you like to see in place to stop that from happening?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Well, I think the first thing to say is we're doing what we've done right through the pandemic, and that is try and keep the virus out as much as possible to give us time to learn more, and WHO put out an update today, which I categorise as saying that we don't really know much about this virus. But the important thing is—and as the PM mentioned earlier on—that by far the dominant circulating variant globally, and certainly our outbreak here in New Zealand, is Delta, and we know that the vaccine—our current vaccine—is highly effective against that. So what we're looking at first is just whether there's anything else we should be doing at the border to help reduce the likelihood we get Omicron across the border in the near term, and we've already put in place some additional measures—that is, for anyone coming from those nine countries, it's a 14-day managed isolation period. Anyone who has left managed isolation and is in the community who may have come from those countries, we are contacting right at the moment, and they will be doing a further seven, rather than three, days in the community, with a day 12 test. So it's really just looking to keep it out while we learn more about it, including its transmissibility, the impact it has on severity of disease, and also, quite rapidly, we should know within a week or two from lab studies the effect of the vaccine on this strain.

Media: What are some of those other things that you're looking at doing around the border?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Oh, just to see whether there is anything else we would do at the border routinely, given that we're already seeing a growing number of countries where the Omicron variant has been found—including Australia, as you're aware. Whether there's any change to current length of stay and the testing regime, at this stage we're not advising anything in particular, but we'll keep that under advisement.

PM: I think I had Jessica.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, are you aware of concerns from home-care workers and support workers who have been supplied food-grade gloves to use as PPE?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: No, I'm not aware of that, and I'd be surprised, because we have an incredibly good supply of gloves here now in our PPE stores. So I'm happy to follow that up and see if that's an issue.

Media: So there's absolutely no shortage of medical grade gloves—the PPE supply is all good?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: That's my understanding, yes. We have a very good supply of gloves.

Media: And, Prime Minister, with the flights—for Omicron, the WHO is recommending that we shouldn't be cancelling flights, because it's a blunt tool. Do you stand by our cancellation of flights to the lower part of Africa?

PM: We've been totally consistent all the way through this pandemic: we have always used our borders as a means of protection, and we will continue to do so. The World Health Organization has consistently taken a different view, but we have found that the ability to use quarantine at our borders, as we have in place now, is proving vital for COVID management, particularly as we see this new variant emerge.

OK, so—yes, sorry. In the front.

Media: Does the emergence of Omicron influence any of the decisions you made around the traffic light system?

PM: No, because, actually, as we've consistently said, in many ways it adds a greater level of protection through the use of vaccine passes. So, yes, the alert level system has served us really well, but now we want to continue to use the tools we have, and the vaccine pass in addition to that. The commentary I've seen from scientists, in particular, has been

that whilst we are undertaking work to better understand the impact of Omicron, the things that are fundamental are things like mask use, contact tracing, isolation of cases—all the things that we have been doing to date, and will continue to do under this framework.

Media: And some countries are cancelling travellers more broadly than from southern Africa. Is that something that you're considering at this point?

PM: In many cases that will be countries that won't necessarily have the kinds of protections we have. We put people through a managed isolation system and we test them rigorously while they're there. So that won't be something that operates in all countries, and so the quickest thing for many of them would be to simply close down the borders. Keep in mind that we will continue to review whether or not any other countries need to be added to our very high - risk country list as well.

Marc.

Media: For Dr Bloomfield: does the sort of emergence of this Omicron variant underscore the need for sort of vaccine equity around the world? And, Prime Minister, as well: are you disappointed to see the TRIPS waiver process still being held up by developed countries—countries in Europe and the UK?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: On your first question, yes, it's very important that as part of a global pandemic response, that countries that can afford to support vaccine availability in low-income countries, and that's certainly been a key part of our advice to Government about donations, and it's been—and we've also provided, of course, direct support to a number of Pacific countries, not just with vaccines but direct support to help with the vaccination programmes. It does reiterate this, because the best way to prevent the development, or the emergence of these variants is to reduce the amount of infection there is globally, so it reiterates the point.

PM: Yeah. On the 12th ministerial meeting in Geneva—yes, a shame to see that cancelled, but you can also understand the circumstances under which it has been. You know, I think that the world has two challenges that we must meet: firstly, equitable vaccine distribution—absolutely—but, at the same time, support for the distribution in-country and support in whatever way we can to overcome hesitancy. In some cases, countries have had limited access; in others, they've had access but the ability to distribute and then have the receipt of those vaccines welcomed has been challenging. Now, we won't have all the answers there. You have to have a good understanding of a population to know what the answer is there, but I do think that is one of the challenges.

Media: It's been six months since both the US and New Zealand came out in favour of that TRIPS waiver process for the vaccine. Has the Government and have you been pushing the hold-outs in the EU to come around on this issue?

PM: A particular focus for us, actually, in the past few months has been ensuring the smooth movement at the border of vaccinations as they stand, while we've been APEC chair—so making sure that we remove tariffs and any restrictions that may exist on vaccines and vaccine consumables—and we've done that successfully; at the same time, supporting the wider work of TRIPS. The next challenge as well will be making sure that we have wide access to antivirals, because in those countries perhaps where they see hesitancy, they may see greater uptake of treatment, and we need to ensure that is equitable as well.

Media: Deputy Prime Minister Robertson—

PM: Sorry, I might just, Tova—if I can—just go to those who haven't had a question yet. Michael—down the back and here. Yep.

Media: Minister Robertson hasn't had a question.

PM: Sorry, who hasn't? Oh, Minister Robertson.

Hon Grant Robertson: I've got lots of questions!

PM: Yeah. Sorry, I had—what did I say? Forgive me. John, Michael—yeah—and then in the front.

Media: Prime Minister, in Auckland, the fatal shooting today in Glen Eden. Have you spoken to police about this, and are you concerned that police have lost control of law enforcement in Auckland?

PM: No, I do not hold that latter concern. I have not had a chance to be briefed on the incident in Auckland yet, as a result of Cabinet meetings throughout the afternoon, but I do intend to touch base with the police Minister.

Media: Are you concerned about the spate of recent shootings, particularly in parts of West Auckland and South Auckland?

PM: Look, what I would say is that of course we have taken direct action to try and reduce down the access and nature of firearms that are being accessed in the wider community. So you'll see that we've moved on licensing. We've removed those weapons that are military style and, for the most part, were in the hands of the criminal fraternity—are designed to cause mass devastation. We have taken action on firearms; we will continue to do so. The efforts of police have also been very focused on the seizure of both firearms and criminal assets through a number of operations that have been very successful, and we will continue to support them to do that work.

Media: Can I ask a follow up on that, Prime Minister?

PM: Yeah, sorry. I said Michael, and then I'd come down the back and then—OK.

Media: In Auckland specifically, what things are you looking for to move the city to the orange setting, and do you see that happening at all this summer?

PM: Because you'll see very solid rates of vaccination in Auckland—they've done an incredible job—for them, it turns more to outbreak and just the ongoing outbreak management. So that's what we'll be looking to.

Media: So are you looking at certain case numbers or—

PM: Yeah, just whether or not—we have seen what has been described to me by modellers as at least a plateauing, which is really positive. I think we'd really want to see that really bed in.

Perhaps, Dr Bloomfield, you might like to comment on what we're seeing in the outbreak in Auckland?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes. Just to add to that, we have certainly seen that plateauing of cases and hospitalisations, which is good, and it will be interesting to see over this next couple of weeks, as Auckland moves into the red setting—which, of course, compared with the current setting there, opens more things up, including hospitality, but with the use of vaccine passes. So we've seen this plateauing in the situation where Auckland moved from level 3.1 to 3.2, so it's a good sign and it really does reflect the high vaccination rates. And we'll be looking to see that plateauing continue and, hopefully, a decline in cases, and that would be a good signal the outbreak's well under control.

Media: Do you expect that to happen with the move to the red settings—that the cases will continue to plateau and decline—or what does your modelling show?

PM: The general sense has been that the easing thus far hasn't contributed to—

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: That's right. So the modelling—well, it's hard to predict exactly what will happen. But, again, the key influence that's happening here is those high vaccination rates, and those are still going up, not down, day by day. And, of course, from today, we've started the booster programme as well, so that brings in especially those healthcare staff, border staff, who were—among the first people vaccinated were those in Auckland, so they can now get that booster just to really get that increase in immunity for those individuals.

PM: I'm going to come here, then here, and then I'm going to come to questions for Minister Robertson.

Media: Thank you, Prime Minister. A question for you and Dr Bloomfield. So just on the home isolation deaths—the review of those deaths—are you now confident there won't be any more potentially preventable deaths, and that the failures in the review—IT issues, overloaded systems, etc.—have all been fixed and they're not going to happen again?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So the work on the information systems is continuing. The processes for handover between agencies are much stronger. At the moment, there are really good workarounds while the information systems are being linked up. Our intention is of course to prevent avoidable deaths in the community—indeed, in any healthcare setting. I'm confident the system is much stronger, and one of the recommendations that is being implemented, of course, is to put a clinical governance group across the top of that whole system, and that will be doing ongoing reviews just to check and see if there are any signals that might suggest if a system isn't working as well as it could. So that's part of the ongoing quality improvement.

Media: The Delta outbreak was traced back to an MIQ leak. What's—can you—

PM: Well, we still don't know.

Media: Well, we still don't know, but—

PM: We still don't know.

Media: —it's one of the options. Can you assure the public that Omicron won't sneak through in that same way?

PM: Well, the first thing that I'd say is that, actually, we explored every possible avenue, you know. You'll recall there was one poor MIQ worker who was tested in every possible way to establish if they were the route out of MIQ, and it was never established. Of course, you'll recall that we've had—you know, I think it's somewhere in the order of, now, 190,000 people who have come through our managed isolation facilities. It has operated very successfully for us, and we will continue to use those very stringent settings to prevent cases from entering our community. And we will continue to do so with this variant as well, as we do with the Delta variant, which of course, we know, is the dominant variant at present.

The point I would make is it was only a few days ago that cries from the Opposition in particular came for us to get rid of all managed isolation facilities immediately. I stand by our decision not to do that. I stand by all of the decisions we've made through this pandemic. We've always been cautious, we've always focused on evidence, and we've always tried to create settings that will help us navigate the entirety of this pandemic, not just a political cycle.

Minister Robertson, would you—

Hon Grant Robertson: Really?

Media: Wearing your sports hat, please, Minister. How disappointing is it that four days out from their first ever game, the Wellington Phoenix women's side still don't have a sponsor?

Hon Grant Robertson: Oh look, I would encourage any corporate interested in supporting a team that is playing in a trans-Tasman competition and will be playing a higher level of football to get in behind that team. We have historically seen corporates reluctant to sponsor major women's sports teams, but all over the world, audiences for women's sport are increasing. Here in New Zealand, it's a big part of our strategy, so I would certainly encourage that. I know the Phoenix organisation have been working hard, and they'll make sure that the team is well supported while they're looking for a sponsor.

Media: Do you think that that lack of sponsorship talks to kind of systemic sexism within women's sport?

Hon Grant Robertson: Oh, women's sport has struggled for visibility and to be properly valued, and it's the reason why, when I became the Minister of sport, we put it as our number

one priority. We have lifted the visibility, and we've invested significantly in coaching, high-performance sport, and community sport as well. And, again, I say, get on board if you're a corporate sponsor out there. This is a team that's going to be high profile, and there's great opportunity there.

Media: A Government sponsor, maybe?

Hon Grant Robertson: Ha, ha! Let's see what else is out there.

PM: We're supporting quite a few competitions at present.

Bernard.

Media: Minister Robertson, could you tell us what is the situation for businesses that choose not to enter the traffic light system and are affected because they don't have customers because they're not allowed to—will they also get the support payment?

Hon Grant Robertson: The transition support payment relates to a revenue period before the framework comes into operation, so the transition payment looks backwards to whether or not your revenue was affected when vaccine passes weren't par. Looking forward from here, I've expressed my view that if we're using a revenue-drop basis for support and that revenue drop is caused by the fact that you have chosen not to use a certificate regime, then it's my view that those kinds of economic supports shouldn't be available. As it happens, we're not proposing those at this time, but that certainly remains my view.

Media: And of the money that was paid to businesses last year and this year, those non-financial businesses have increased their cash transaction accounts by \$20 billion over the time the Government gave them \$14 billion. Will you be looking to claw that \$14 billion back, and the \$490 million today?

Hon Grant Robertson: No, and that's because we didn't go into this with that basis. The people who signed up for these schemes didn't sign it up with a claw-back provision within it. I think we discussed this very matter on 22 October, and the small businesses have not had that kind of return; it's mainly been the very larger ones that have. These supports that we've had throughout this period of this outbreak have largely been targeted towards small businesses. The Resurgence Support Payment and this transition payment are capped at that 50 FTE level. What businesses may choose to do in terms of whether or not they believe that—you know, they got the support because they were concerned that things would happen, and then they didn't. We've seen a number of businesses pay back, and that's entirely up to them. But I think it would be bad faith of me to ask to claw back, when that wasn't what people signed up for.

PM: Last question, and then I'll come to Benedict.

Media: Why is it fair to claw back from beneficiaries, but it's not fair to claw back from businesses?

Hon Grant Robertson: Well, when businesses are overpaid for something in any description, they will be asked for the money back. This is not a case of overpayment; it's simply a case of the way the scheme was set up. I'd also say that a big chunk of this money has gone through and supported people to stay in work and keep their jobs. The money has actually gone to workers—some of them low-income workers—to make sure they are in work, and we stand here today with a 3.4 percent unemployment rate. And so I think in that sense, the wage subsidy scheme, in particular, has served its purpose.

PM: Benedict.

Media: Prime Minister, a big day tomorrow for the National Party. Who's your money on: Christopher Luxon or Simon Bridges?

PM: I can, hand on heart, say that, obviously, with decisions at Cabinet around moving into the new traffic light system, making sure we've got protections against Omicron, and

pandemic management generally, the ongoing leadership challenges for the National Party are not something I've turned my mind to.

Yeah, further questions for Minister Robertson?

Media: What do you think about National!

PM: OK—so you're OK there.

We'll come to—yes, here, and then Jason, and then we might wrap.

Media: Is there a possibility that Auckland moves into orange on that December update and then is in orange for the rest of the summer, or is it your intention to keep Auckland not orange until 17 January?

PM: Yeah, those are decisions that we haven't predetermined. We've been very clear about what we expect around green, but what we expect around wanting to lift vaccination levels beyond that, Cabinet will make a decision, in good faith, in two weeks' time.

The one other thing that I would say is that for those areas that have felt anxious, I think what they'll find, if they have lower vaccination levels, is that red does afford greater protections to them, and so that is a message I would send to those communities who may have concern. We're doing this now because we do believe it adds an extra layer. And, on the flip side, those who might be disappointed to be in orange: well, actually—relative to now—with vaccine passes, you can move back to gatherings again, so it does actually offer more. Fair to say that there's something it for everyone.

All right. Jason—last one.

Media: Oh, that was actually mine, but I guess, on behalf of a colleague, what does today's decision mean for al fresco dining?

PM: Well, the ability for al fresco dining, which I know some in this room will be very pleased to hear—you can continue with alfresco dining. But from Friday, for Aucklanders, they will also be able to dine indoors and also use an indoor lavatory, which I know will be a welcome change.

Hon Grant Robertson: We better go, Prime Minister. We're on a deadline.

PM: Yeah, all right. Thank you. Thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference