

**In confidence**

Office of the Minister for COVID-19 Response

Cabinet

**Decision to use the COVID-19 Pfizer vaccine for children aged 12 to 15 years**

**Proposal**

- 1 This paper updates Cabinet on the evolving context around the risks of COVID-19 and the best use of our Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine (the Pfizer vaccine) and seeks agreement from Cabinet on the use of the Pfizer vaccine for children aged 12 to 15 years.

**Executive Summary**

- 2 This paper considers extending the eligibility to access the Pfizer vaccine in the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme (the Immunisation Programme) to children aged 12 to 15 years, following provisional consent by Medsafe confirming its safety and efficacy in this age group. While children and young people have a lower risk of severe disease or death due to COVID-19 than adults, their prioritisation within the Immunisation Programme needs to address additional risks and opportunities including:
  - 2.1 recent changes to the standard interval between vaccine doses that enable more people to be vaccinated sooner
  - 2.2 the international situation and potential risks posed by the Delta variant; and
  - 2.3 considerations around equity and whānau-based approaches.
- 3 It is recommended that we extend eligibility for the Pfizer vaccine to children aged 12 to 15 years in line with the Immunisation Programme age band rollout.
- 4 Officials will consider how we maximise uptake for this group, while ensuring that other childhood immunisation programmes are not compromised.
- 5 New Zealand continues to play a role internationally, supporting access to vaccines for the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu and other Pacific countries such as Fiji. 6(a), 6(b)(i)

[Redacted text block]

## **Achieving the objectives of the Immunisation Programme by making best use of the Pfizer vaccine**

- 6 Internationally, COVID-19 continues to be a threat, which has been particularly evident with the spread of the Delta variant across the world and the recent outbreaks in Australia.
- 7 We are also seeing the positive impact of immunisation programmes overseas. There is a growing base of evidence on the effectiveness and safety of COVID-19 vaccines, including the Pfizer vaccine. This evidence-based approach supports us in how we mobilise our own Immunisation Programme.
- 8 Vaccine Ministers have agreed to increase the recommended interval between the two vaccine doses, which would allow more people to receive their first dose sooner. This lowers the population risk in the case of an outbreak and community transmission of COVID-19 variants, including the Delta strain. In addition, emerging evidence suggests a longer interval could enhance a person's immune response with no additional safety issues.
- 9 As part of the ongoing rollout of the Immunisation Programme, officials have considered the possible extension of the eligible population to include children 12 to 15 years of age, based on emerging evidence and experience of other countries.

## **Use of the Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine in children aged 12 to 15 years**

*The Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine has been granted provisional approval by Medsafe for children aged 12 to 15 years*

- 10 In February 2021, Cabinet agreed that the Immunisation Programme proceed with the roll out of the Pfizer vaccine [CAB-21-MIN-0011 refers].
- 11 At that time it was noted that clinical trials had not yet included those under 16 years, and that once further paediatric trials had been conducted, Medsafe would be able to consider extending the provisional consent for the COVID-19 Pfizer vaccine to a younger cohort.
- 12 Medsafe has since given provisional consent for the use of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine in children aged 12 to 15 years. Medsafe's role is to consider whether a vaccine is safe and effective for a particular group of people.
- 13 On 28 June 2021, Cabinet deferred consideration of extending the use of the vaccine in children aged 12 to 15 years [CAB-21-MIN-0245 refers], until after the Director-General of Health had received advice requested from the COVID-19 Vaccine Technical Advisory Group (CV TAG).
- 14 CV TAG have considered what priority to give vaccination of this age group, given that the vaccine is safe and effective. The recommendations from the CV TAG are noted in this paper and are considered as part of the Decision to Use process for children aged 12 to 15 years.

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*Advice was provided by the CV TAG on use of the Pfizer vaccine for children aged 12 to 15 years*

- 15 In June, CV TAG advice was sought for the use of the Pfizer vaccine for children aged 12 to 15 years, following the provisional consent for use in this age group by Medsafe.
- 16 At that time, the CV TAG recommended that the rollout continue to focus on the existing population groups aged 16 years and over that are at risk of COVID-19, and that any decision to use the COVID-19 vaccine in the 12 to 15 year-old age group should reflect this current priority.
- 17 Subsequent advice from CV TAG in August, supported the inclusion of all children aged 12 to 15 years of age in the Immunisation Programme alongside their wider whānau, with potential benefits that include:
  - 17.1 helping to provide equitable vaccination coverage in Māori and Pacific Peoples, as young people represent a greater proportion in these communities compared to the overall population, and given that Māori and Pacific Peoples are higher risk from COVID-19; and
  - 17.2 the possibility to reduce school closures and disruption to the education system.
- 18 Internationally, a number of peak bodies, such as the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, recommend that everyone 12 years and over should be vaccinated to help protect against COVID-19, in the context of widespread community transmission in the US. There are also some vulnerable populations aged 12 to 15 years that are at higher risk from COVID-19 that warrant prioritisation.

*Based on the advice received from the Director-General of Health, I recommend that Cabinet agree to proceed with using the Pfizer vaccine for children aged 12 to 15 years*

- 19 Children and young people have a lower risk of severe disease or death due to COVID-19 than adults, as noted by the CV TAG, meaning that the adult programme continues to have greater priority. New Zealand also does not currently have community transmission, meaning there is a low risk of exposure.
- 20 In addition to CV TAG advice, the Director-General of Health considered additional risks and opportunities for vaccinating children aged 12 to 15 years, which include:
  - 20.1 recent changes to the standard interval between vaccine doses that enable more people to be vaccinated sooner
  - 20.2 the evolving international situation and potential risks, including increased transmissibility of the Delta variant; and

- 20.3 considerations around equity for Māori and Pacific populations with their younger age structures and the opportunity to vaccinate children aged 12 to 15 with their parents, including through whānau-based approaches.
- 21 As we now have access to sufficient supply of the Pfizer vaccine and will progress through age cohorts sooner (due to the increased interval between doses), it will be possible to vaccinate children. Vaccinating as many eligible people as possible, including children, will support the objectives of our Immunisation Programme.
- 22 I have considered the advice outlined above and recommend that Cabinet agree to use the COVID-19 Pfizer vaccine for children aged 12 to 15 years in line with the Immunisation Programme rollout to manage the potential risks and equity considerations noted above. The Immunisation Programme will seek final agreement from Vaccine Ministers prior to proceeding with opening invitations for this age group.
- 23 Officials will consider how we maximise uptake for this group, while ensuring that other childhood immunisation programmes are not compromised. They will provide further detailed advice about how this will be operationalised.

### International considerations

- 24 New Zealand continues to play a role internationally, supporting access to vaccines particularly for the six countries in Polynesia with whom we have constitutional relationships and/or strong historical and cultural ties: the Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau, Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu. New Zealand is also supporting access to vaccines for other Pacific countries such as Fiji.
- 25 The Pfizer vaccine has been distributed to the eligible populations of the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau so far. Now that provisional consent has been granted for children aged 12 to 15 years, there is an opportunity to supply additional vaccine to these countries to enable vaccination of their population aged 12 years and over, in line with domestic rollout. § 6(b)(i)  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- 26 Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Fiji have been using the AstraZeneca vaccine for the majority of their populations. However, AstraZeneca is not currently recommended or approved for some population groups, e.g. children aged 17 and younger or pregnant women, and paediatric clinical trials are on hold. § 6(b)(i)  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]
- 27 Officials will report back to Cabinet on 23 August with advice on providing the Pfizer vaccine for this age group § 9(2)(f)(iv), § 9(2)(g)(i) later in the year once we have greater certainty of domestic supply.

### Financial Implications

- 28 There are no new financial implications from the proposals in this paper as all necessary funding has already been approved by Cabinet [CAB-21-MIN-0229 refers].

### Legislative Implications

- 29 There are no legislative implications arising from the recommendations in this paper.

### Population Implications

- 30 Vaccinating children will increase the proportion of people who have a level of protection from COVID-19, reducing the potential harm COVID-19 could cause in our communities if there was an outbreak.

### Human Rights

- 31 The proposal in this paper for children aged 12 to 15 years to be offered the vaccine does not engage the right to discrimination on the basis of age, as the right only begins at age 16 (section 21(1)(i) of the Human Rights Act 1993, section 19 of the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990). In any event, this is a rights-positive proposal as it expands access to the vaccines to children aged 12 to 15 years.

### Consultation

- 32 The Ministry of Health has consulted with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Crown Law, Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice. The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has been informed.

### Communications

- 33 Subject to Cabinet's agreement on the decision to use the Pfizer vaccine for children aged 12 to 15 years; the key messaging on this decision is:

33.1 we are focused on prioritising those who have the highest risk of severe disease from COVID-19 infection (Groups 1 to 3 and then by age cohort);

33.2 children aged 12 to 15 years are now eligible to be vaccinated in alignment with Immunisation Programme age band rollout.

- 34 Officials are preparing messaging to support announcements on 16 August 2021 and ensure that there is transparent and consistent communications on the decision to use for children aged 12 to 15 years.

### Proactive Release

- 35 We intend to proactively release this Cabinet paper within 30 working days, with redactions as appropriate under the Official Information Act 1982.

**Recommendations**

The Minister for COVID-19 Response, recommends that Cabinet:

- 1 **Note** that Medsafe has given provisional consent for the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine to include children aged 12 to 15 years.
- 2 **Agree** to extend the use of the Pfizer vaccine in the Immunisation Programme to children aged 12 to 15 years from September 2021.
- 3 **Note** Vaccine Ministers will provide final agreement to the implementation approach prior to opening up invitations for children aged 12 to 15 years.
- 4 **6(b)(i)** [Redacted]
- 5 **6(b)(i)** [Redacted]
- 6 **Note** that Officials will report back to Cabinet on 23 August with advice on providing the Pfizer vaccine to the Pacific for children aged 12 to 17 years and pregnant women later in the year once we have more certainty of domestic supply.

Authorised for lodgement  
Hon Chris Hipkins  
Minister for COVID-19 Response