

Briefing

Review of COVID-19 Alert Level restrictions to respond to community cases in February 2021

Date due to MO: 15 February 2021 **Action required by:** 15 February 2021

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Health Report number:** 20210287

To: Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister COVID-19 Response

Copy to: Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister
Hon Andrew Little, Minister of Health
Hon Kris Faafoi, Minister of Justice

Contact for telephone discussion

Name	Position	Telephone
Dr Ashley Bloomfield	Director-General of Health	s 9(2)(a)
Caroline Flora	Acting Deputy Director-General, System Strategy and Policy	s 9(2)(a)

Minister's office to complete:

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Approved | <input type="checkbox"/> Decline | <input type="checkbox"/> Noted |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Needs change | <input type="checkbox"/> Seen | <input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by events |
| <input type="checkbox"/> See Minister's Notes | <input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn | |

Comment:

Review of COVID-19 Alert Level restrictions to respond to community cases in February 2021

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Date:** 15 February 2021

To: Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response

Purpose of report

1. This report sets out my public health advice following a 24 hour review of the COVID-19 Public Health Response (Alert Level Requirements) Order 2021 addressing the outbreak of COVID-19 in February 2021.

Key points

2. On Sunday 14 February 2021 Cabinet agreed to raise the Alert Levels in Auckland to Alert Level 3 and across the rest of New Zealand to Alert Level 2. The HR provided to you with the signature version of the Alert Level Order last night noted that the settings in the Alert Level Order would be reviewed every 24 hours. This report provides you with my public health advice following that first review.
3. The case details for the February 2021 outbreak as provided in HR 20210281 have not been repeated here. I am able to provide the following additional information on that outbreak:
 - a. The genomes of Cases A and B are identical, and of the B1.1.7 variant first identified in the United Kingdom. Source investigation is continuing with genome sequencing results supporting targeted investigations. However, no scenarios have yet been ruled out regarding source.
 - b. Serology is being conducted on all members of the household, including Case B's s 9(2)(a) who was symptomatic but has provided two negative tests, and we are awaiting results.
 - c. Of the seven close contacts identified yesterday, all have been tested and returned negative results. Additional close contacts have been identified, including through the Papatoetoe High School connection, and are being tested. No positive test results have been received so far.
 - d. The existing testing sites in Auckland and Taranaki have extended hours and increased staffing. Additional pop-up testing centres have been stood up at Papatoetoe High School and Sky Chefs for targeted testing.

- e. The District Health Board has arranged testing for the school community. All close contacts in the school of the cases are in self isolation and must return two negative tests before isolation can end. All those in the rest of the school are self-isolating and must have a negative test result before returning. The school will be closed for two days to allow for the testing to be done.
 - f. Regular wastewater testing continues in Auckland and most recent testing from February 2021 did not detect any virus. Additionally, the Ministry of Health are working with ESR on also standing up wastewater testing in New Plymouth. In parallel, continued planning is underway to have wastewater testing across all main centres to be set up to enable spot checking.
4. Based on the above evidence, the risk of the cases transmitting COVID-19 during their infectious period to those outside of close household contacts is considered to be high but unchanged since advice was provided to you last night.

Impacts of Alert Level recommendations on COVID-19 Immunisation Programme

5. The evidence currently suggests we are still in a low community transmission scenario. Therefore, officials continue to prepare for Implementation of the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme on the basis of Scenario 1: Low (or no) community transmission. If we were to shift to Scenario 2: controlled outbreaks, border and MIQ workers would continue to be a key focus at the initial stages of the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme to ensure we reduce the risk of further community transmission. A shift to Scenario 2: Controlled outbreaks would have an impact on how we roll out to Tiers 2 and 3 of the Sequencing Framework, because there would be a stronger focus on the relevant region or locality, rather than nationwide roll-out. Contingency planning is underway.

Public Health advice

6. This report provides the following public health advice for consideration in considering whether the settings in the Alert Level Order need to change:
- a. Based on the evidence available thus far, the Ministry of Health considers that the risk of the cases transmitting COVID-19 during their infectious period to those outside of close household contacts is still high.
 - b. Given that Case A attended school during their infectious period; should anyone have been exposed to COVID-19 at the school, they could potentially now be infectious.
 - c. Case A and B's travel to Taranaki was during the infectious period of Case A and a precautionary approach is recommended. In addition, this was during a time where the general population of New Zealand were highly mobile (Waitangi weekend) and it is possible that persons exposed during this trip may have travelled back to other areas across New Zealand.
 - d. The population at risk at this stage includes a vulnerable community given the ethnicity of the cases and includes school aged children.
 - e. Additional information available at this time relates to the genome sequencing results, which support ongoing targeted investigations. However, no scenarios have yet been ruled out regarding source.

7. Based on the available evidence at 12:00pm Monday 15 February my advice is that on balance **the current alert levels should remain, i.e. Alert Level 3 in Auckland and Alert Level Two in the rest of New Zealand.**
8. As part of my daily review I have considered whether the rest of New Zealand should be moved to Alert Level 3. An Alert Level change to Level 3 for the rest of New Zealand has been considered, and on balance I have determined at this time a wider Alert Level 3 is still not required due to the lack of positive test results to date in locations visited by Cases A and B, and lack of firm evidence of wider community spread throughout other regions.
9. I have also considered whether a decrease in Alert Levels for both Auckland and the rest of New Zealand is appropriate at this time and have concluded it is not, based on the lack of certainty over the source of infection and whether there is wider community transmission.
10. **I will review the alert level again in 24 hours.**

Recommendations

I recommend you:

- a) **Note** the public health advice contained in this report. **Noted**
- b) **Note** that officials continue to prepare for Implementation of the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme on the basis of Scenario 1 as there is currently low community transmission and contingency planning is underway should the transmission situation change. **Noted**
- c) **Note** my recommendation that you retain the current Alert Level settings of Alert Level 3 in Auckland and Alert Level 2 for the rest of New Zealand. **Noted**

Dr Ashley Bloomfield
Director-General of Health

Date: 15/2/21



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Health

Date: 16/2/2021

Review of COVID-19 Alert Level restrictions to respond to community cases in February 2021

Background and latest case information

11. On Sunday 14 February 2021 Cabinet agreed to raise the Alert Levels in Auckland to Alert Level 3 and across the rest of New Zealand to Alert Level 2. The HR provided to you with the signature version of the Alert Level Order last night noted that the settings in the Alert Level Order would be reviewed every 24 hours. This report provides you with my public health advice following that first review.

Case information

12. The case details for the February 2021 outbreak as provided in HR 20210281 have not been repeated here. I am able to provide the following additional information on that outbreak:
- a. The genomes of Cases A and B are identical, and of the B1.17 variant first identified in the United Kingdom. The genome is one mutation different from a case in a MIF in December 2020, but there is no epidemiological link between these cases. Source investigation is continuing with genome sequencing results supporting targeted investigations. However, no scenarios have yet been ruled out regarding source.
 - b. Serology is being conducted on all members of the household, including Case B's s 9(2)(a) who was symptomatic but has provided two negative tests, and we are awaiting results.
 - c. Of the seven close contacts identified yesterday, all have been tested and returned negative results. Additional close contacts have been identified, including through the Papatoetoe High School connection, and are being tested. No positive test results have been received so far.
 - d. The existing testing sites in Auckland and Taranki have extended hours and increased staffing. Additional pop-up testing centres have been stood up at Papatoetoe High School and Sky Chefs for targeted testing.
 - e. The District Health Board has arranged testing for the school community. All close contacts in the school of the cases are in self isolation and must return two negative tests before isolation can end. All those in the rest of the school are self-isolating and must have a negative test result before returning. The school will be closed for two days to allow for the testing to be done.
 - f. Regular wastewater testing continues in Auckland and most recent testing from February 2021 did not detect any virus. Additionally, the Ministry of Health are working with ESR on also standing up wastewater testing in New Plymouth. In parallel, continued planning is underway to have wastewater testing across all main centres to be set up to enable spot checking.
 - g. Impacts of Alert Level recommendations on COVID-19 Immunisation Programme

13. Based on the above evidence, the risk of the cases transmitting COVID-19 during their infectious period to those outside of close household contacts is considered to be high but unchanged since advice was provided to you last night.

Impacts of Alert Level recommendations on COVID-19 Immunisation Programme

14. The evidence currently suggests we are still in a low community transmission scenario. Therefore, officials continue to prepare for Implementation of the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme on the basis of Scenario 1: Low (or no) community transmission. If we were to shift to Scenario 2: controlled outbreaks, border and MIQ workers would continue to be a key focus at the initial stages of the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme to ensure we reduce the risk of further community transmission. A shift to Scenario 2: Controlled outbreaks would have an impact on how we roll out to Tiers 2 and 3 of the Sequencing Framework, because there would be a stronger focus on the relevant region or locality, rather than nationwide roll-out. Contingency planning is underway.

Potential size of outbreak

15. Researchers at Te Punaha Matatini (TPM), operating under contract to the government, have estimated the size of likely outbreaks, at the time of detection, based on the number of generations of transmission. These estimates have recently been updated to reflect the impact of variant that is 50% more transmissible than the variants that have previously been dominant in New Zealand.
16. Genome sequencing will help inform source investigation. The genomes of Cases A and B are identical, and of the B1.1.7 variant first identified in the United Kingdom. The genome is one mutation different from a case in a MIF in December 2020, but there is no epidemiological link between these cases. Source investigation is continuing with genome sequencing results supporting targeted investigations. However, no scenarios have yet been ruled out regarding source investigation.
17. Serology is being conducted on all members of the household, including the mother in law who was symptomatic but has provided two negative tests, and we are awaiting results.

Public health advice

18. I am advising that current Alert Level settings remain the same – that is, Alert Level 3 in Auckland and Alert Level 2 across the rest of New Zealand.
19. I will review this again in 24 hours and provide you with further advice.

Factors to consider when making decisions about COVID-19 Alert Levels

20. The public health factors to be considered when making decisions about COVID-19 Alert Levels were agreed by Cabinet on 4 May 2020. These factors continue to be relevant in the context of the new outbreak. They provide a degree of confidence that:
- transmission is restricted to households and known clusters;
 - testing and contact tracing capacity is adequate;
 - border control and isolation measures are robust;
 - public compliance is high; and

- e. there is sufficient health and disability system capacity to manage COVID-19 cases, including adequate PPE for people for whom it is recommended.

Transmission

- 21. As at Sunday 14 February 2021 there are three active cases of COVID-19 in the community. Currently the source of these infections is unknown.
- 22. A total of 205 community cases and 643 Managed Isolation and Quarantine cases have been identified since 11 August 2020.
- 23. The source of the current case infection remains unknown and is under investigation, with the possibility that a definitive source may not be found.
- 24. There are a further 44 active cases of COVID-19 in managed isolation and quarantine facilities associated with international travel. These are managed through well-established processes.

Surveillance and contact tracing

- 25. National testing guidance has been updated for the current cases and is clear that all people presenting with relevant symptoms should be tested, regardless of region. In Auckland, at-risk communities (including Māori, Pacific communities, older people and those with pre-existing conditions) should be offered a test when presenting to primary or secondary care services, even if asymptomatic.
- 26. The existing testing sites in Auckland and Taranaki have extended hours and increased staffing. Additional pop-up testing centres have been stood up at Papatoetoe High School and Sky Chefs for targeted testing.
- 27. The District Health Board has arranged testing for the school community. All close contacts in the school of the cases are in self isolation and must return two negative tests before isolation can end. All those in the rest of the school are self-isolating and must have a negative test result before returning. The school will be closed for further two days to allow for the testing to be done.
- 28. Regular wastewater testing continues in Auckland and most recent testing from February 2021 did not detect any virus. Additionally, the Ministry of Health are working with ESR on also standing up wastewater testing in New Plymouth. Running parallel is continued planning to have wastewater testing across all main centres to be set up to enable spot checking.
- 29. Of the seven close contacts identified yesterday, all have been tested and returned negative results. Additional close contacts have been identified, including through the Papatoetoe High School connection, and are being tested. No positive test results have been received so far.
- 30. Contact tracing is being carried out by the Ministry of Health and the regional public health services across what is a growing number of potential exposure events across New Plymouth and South Auckland.

Overall testing and contact tracing capacity

31. Testing has continued to be at a high level in recent weeks. On 14 February 2021, 3,132 tests were processed, bringing the weekly total of tests processed last week to more than 27,000. Approximately 126,000 have been carried out in the last month. An increased level of testing from current levels remains sustainable in the medium term, without putting undue pressure on supplies or laboratory staff. We have supplies in stock for approximately two months at current levels of testing.
32. Contact tracing capacity is sufficient to manage 350 cases per day. The seven close contacts identified yesterday as part of the current case have all been contacted and tested, returning negative results. Public Health Units are continuing to work well to support each other's efforts.

Health and disability system capacity

33. Testing has continued to be at a high level in recent weeks. On 14 February 2021, 3,132 tests were processed, bringing the weekly total of tests processed last week to more than 27,000. Approximately 126,000 have been carried out in the last month. An increased level of testing from current levels remains sustainable in the medium term, without putting undue pressure on supplies or laboratory staff. We have supplies in stock for approximately two months at current levels of testing.
34. Contact tracing capacity is sufficient to manage 350 cases per day.

Border controls

35. Robust border controls are critical to the continued success of our elimination strategy. The air and maritime borders remain closed to non-residents and a limited number of others, except by Ministerially-approved exception. Most arrivals are required to provide evidence of a negative COVID-19 test (with some exceptions) prior to boarding flights to come to New Zealand. Arrivals from countries where pre-departure testing is required are also tested on day 0/1 of their arrival in the country and entry into a Managed Isolation Facility and isolated until negative results are returned.
36. Although we have not yet confirmed the origin of the case, at present the evidence from ongoing investigations does not suggest this is the result of a widespread or systemic failure in border controls. We have now put in place Orders to implement a regular testing regime for border workers alongside a suite of other measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 entering via the border.

Compliance and public sentiment

37. There is still good support for, and compliance with, the Government's approach and control measures. NZ COVID Tracer application activity has been trending down slightly recently. There are approximately 2.5 million number of registered NZ COVID Tracer app users, as of midday 14 February 2021. Almost 900,00 poster scans took place yesterday, and over 900,000 devices had Bluetooth active.

Advice on Alert Level settings

38. I have reviewed the current alert level settings in order to ensure these are proportionate to public health risk and respond effectively to the current situation. This report provides the following public health advice for consideration in considering whether the settings in the Alert Level Order need to change:
- a. Based on the evidence available thus far, the Ministry of Health considers that the risk of the cases transmitting COVID-19 during their infectious period to those outside of close household contacts is still high.
 - b. Given that Case A attended school during their infectious period; should anyone have been exposed to COVID-19 at the school, they could potentially now be infectious.
 - c. Case A and B's travel to Taranaki was during the infectious period of Case A and a precautionary approach is recommended. In addition, this was during a time where the general population of New Zealand were highly mobile (Waitangi weekend) and it is possible that persons exposed during this trip may have travelled back to other areas across New Zealand.
 - d. The population at risk at this stage includes a vulnerable community given the ethnicity of the cases and includes school aged children. Investigations to date have not identified a source.
 - e. Additional information available at this time relates to the genome sequencing results, which support ongoing targeted investigations. However, no scenarios have yet been ruled out regarding source investigation.
39. Based on the available evidence at 12:00pm Monday 15 February my advice is that on balance **the current alert levels should remain, i.e. Alert Level 3 in Auckland and Alert Level Two in the rest of New Zealand.**
40. As part of my daily review I have considered whether the rest of New Zealand should be moved to Alert Level 3. An Alert Level change to Level 3 for the rest of New Zealand has been considered, and on balance I have determined at this time a wider Alert Level 3 is still not required due to the lack of positive test results to date in locations visited by Cases A and B, and lack of firm evidence of wider community spread throughout other regions.
41. I have also considered whether a decrease in Alert Levels for both Auckland and the rest of New Zealand is appropriate at this time and have concluded it is not, based on the lack of certainty over the source of infection and whether there is wider community transmission.
42. **I will review the alert level again in 24 hours.**

Next steps

43. We will continue to review every 24 hours providing you with updates. Agencies will work to give effect to the approved Alert Level change. This will include the Ministry of Health continuing to work with other agencies and external stakeholders to ensure that the requirements are complied with.

ENDS.

PROACTIVELY RELEASED