

Briefing

Further measures to reduce COVID-19 risks from returning air crew

Date due to MO:	22 March 2021	Action required by:	22 March 2021
Security level:	IN CONFIDENCE	Health Report number:	20210583
To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response		

Contact for telephone discussion

Name	Position	Telephone
Maree Roberts	Deputy Director-General, System Strategy and Policy	s 9(2)(a)
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Action for Private Secretaries

Return the signed report to the Ministry of Health.

Date dispatched to MO:

Further measures to reduce COVID-19 risks from returning air crew

Purpose of report

1. Following a returning aircrew member recently testing positive for COVID-19, this report proposes an initial review of current air border control measures for returning New Zealand-based aircrew. It also proposes a quarterly review process to ensure the measures stay fit for purpose against global and domestic developments, including the roll out of vaccinations.

Key points

2. On 28 February 2021, an Air New Zealand aircrew member returned to Auckland from Narita airport, Japan and subsequently tested positive on 7 March after routine surveillance testing. They were then moved to Auckland's quarantine facility and all family members subsequently tested negative.
3. The aircrew member arrived from a route not classified as higher risk. Currently only routes between Los Angeles, San Francisco and New Zealand are designated as 'higher-risk'.
4. Officials are now working with Air New Zealand to re-designate scheduled air routes to better reflect actual risk levels as outlined in HR 20210342. As you noted in your response to that report, given the high prevalence of COVID-19 overseas still, most routes are likely to be designated as 'higher risk'.
5. Our public health experts are of the view that the current measures for testing and isolating New Zealand-based aircrew are proportionate to the level of risk. This is based on the observation that there have been only three cases among aircrew in the thousands of end-to-end journeys over the past year, all of which were picked up in testing and none have resulted in further community transmission.
6. We consider that applying the existing 'higher risk' control measures (e.g. a two day stay in a designated self-isolation hotel) to all returning aircrew from overseas would not be proportionate to the level of risk presented by aircrew. However, in light of ongoing concern about the risk presented by aircrew, we have conducted an initial review of current control measures to determine what additional measures could be put in place that are proportionate to the risks presented. These include:
 - a. assessment, and potentially re-designation, of all Air New Zealand scheduled routes (i.e. any further higher risk routes);
 - b. review of the Key Safety Standards, which regulate aircrew member behaviour overseas;
 - c. consider whether an amendment should be made to the Air Border Order and the Isolation and Quarantine Order to compel aircrew returning from a higher risk

- route to isolate in a designated isolation hotel, as well as any legal requirement about restrictions of movements etc within the isolation hotel;
- d. assess whether any changes are required to the testing surveillance regime for aircrew returning from higher risk routes
 7. We will report back on recommendations arising from the review of current control measures on 6 April 2021.
 8. Public health advice is that vaccination of aircrew workers is likely to be the most effective additional measure to reduce COVID-19 risk from arriving aircrew, beyond the measures already in place. Emerging data suggests that vaccinations are effective in both reducing severity of illness and death, and in limiting transmission of COVID-19, including by asymptomatic individuals. ✓
 9. The rollout of the vaccination programme for New Zealand based aircrew who travel overseas is underway and is planned for completion at this stage in late April. To take into account vaccination developments, and other future state settings like quarantine free travel zones, we propose a quarterly review of air border control measures to ensure they remain fit-for-purpose. The first of these reviews will be reported to you on 6 July 2021. ✓

Recommendations

The Ministry recommends that you:

- | | | |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| a) | Note that, in response to three cases of COVID-19 in returning New Zealand-based aircrew the Ministry of Health has conducted a rapid review of current control measures pertaining to returning air crew. | Noted |
| b) | Note that, while our new international route risk assessment framework is likely to show most overseas routes as 'higher risk', the Ministry of Health consider the current arrangements for testing and isolating such air crew to be proportionate to the level of COVID-19 risk they present to the community. | Noted |
| c) | Agree , however, that in light of ongoing concern about the risk presented by aircrew, the Ministry of Health will conduct an initial review of current control measures to determine what additional measures could be put in place that are proportionate to the risks presented – including the designation of all Air New Zealand scheduled air routes. | Yes/No |
| d) | Agree that the results of the initial review of current control measures will be provided to you on 6 April 2021. | Yes/No |
| e) | Note that, based on the available evidence, the most effective additional measure to reduce aircrew infection with COVID-19 is likely to be the vaccination. | Noted |

- f) **Agree**, given the rapidly evolving global and domestic context in relation to vaccinations and other future state settings, officials will review all air border control measures every quarter to ensure they remain fit-for purpose.

☒ Yes ☐ No

- g) **Agree** that the results of the first of the quarterly reviews of all control measures will be provided to you on 6 July 2021.

☒ Yes ☐ No



Steve Waldegrave

**Group Manager, System
Strategy and Policy**

Date: 22/3/2021



Hon Chris Hipkins

**Minister for COVID-19
Response**

Date: 2/4/2021

PROACTIVELY RELEASED

Measures to further reduce COVID-19 risks from returning air crew

Re-assessing risk designations on scheduled international routes

10. Clause 9 of the Air Border Order enables the designation and gazetting of an air route as 'higher-risk'. At this time, only routes between Los Angeles, San Francisco and New Zealand are designated as higher-risk routes.
11. On 19 February 2021 you were provided with a proposed risk assessment framework that would apply to any international airline operating with New Zealand-based aircrew flying scheduled routes (HR20210342 refers).
12. On 27 February 2021 you directed officials to continue to work with Air New Zealand and the Ministry of Transport to model the framework, ascertain any impacts and agree whether any of the health concerns associated with exposure risks could be mitigated.
13. You noted that it was likely that most long-haul international routes to New Zealand would be assessed as higher risk.
14. On 11 March 2021 we provided you with a briefing on the risk designation of scheduled international routes (HR 20210583 refers). You requested that this briefing was updated to address the following issues:
 - a. providing clarity that current control measures at the border are broadly fit for purpose but that there is merit in assessing and, if necessary, adjusting those measures to ensure they remain fit for purpose;
 - b. providing clarity on the timing over which aircrew are likely to be vaccinated.
 - c. more detail on the arrangements in place regarding testing of aircrew;
 - d. providing a sense of the path forward and/or additional measures that could be explored to further enhance risk reduction at the Air Border.
15. This report addresses the issues set out in paragraph 14 (a), (c) and (d).
16. In relation to paragraph 14 (b), we note that our 11 March 2021 briefing (HR 20210583) set out that almost 38 per cent of Air New Zealand aircrew had been vaccinated and that the vaccination process was expected to be completed in April 2021. At this stage, the picture is evolving rapidly day to day, so this is all the information we have at present.

Additional potential control measures to reduce risk at the air border

17. There are several new measures that could be introduced to provide additional assurance that the risk of aircrew returning from a newly designated higher risk route can be effectively mitigated until such time as we can be confident that vaccination meaningfully reduces risk to the New Zealand community from the air border. These measures include:

- a. requiring surveillance testing no earlier than 48 hours but no later than 4 days after return to New Zealand as the optimum window for early detection of infection from a public health point of view.
- b. consequentially, requiring returning aircrew to isolate longer (around seven days) as they will have to wait in the isolation hotel longer while waiting for a negative result from their day 2-4 test.
- c. reviewing the Key Safety Standards to:
 - i. strengthen rules around use of PPE when interacting with customers and moving through airports;
 - ii. separate Air New Zealand-only transport between international airports and layover hotels;
 - iii. require those in isolation in layover hotels overseas not to socialise with other aircrew (noting that this recent concession has had significant benefit for the wellbeing of aircrew overseas);
 - iv. restrict the use of common exercise facilities such as gyms or pools; and
 - v. restricting food sources so that food is either picked up from within the hotel and taken back to the room, or delivered directly to reception (and taken back to the room).
- d. considering whether making it a legal obligation for aircrew returning from a higher risk route to isolate in a designated isolation hotel is warranted, as well as any legal requirement about restrictions of movements etc within the isolation hotel.
- e. investigating the use of saliva testing as an adjunct to weekly nasopharyngeal swabs that aircrew are currently required to undertake.

Considering future state – balancing proportionate risk mitigation with new developments

18. Ideally, aircrew control measures should be considered in the context of future state developments such as vaccine programmes internationally and domestically (including, but not limited to, Air New Zealand aircrew). Similarly, new policy settings around the opening of the border; such as quarantine free travel and bringing air routes out of hibernation are also relevant. However, some of these future state settings are still in their infancy and are being considered by a wider Ministry work programme across all border settings and surveillance regimes.
19. We therefore propose that, to ensure all aircrew settings and route designations remain fit for purpose against future state parameters, a quarterly review is established to accurately assess the proportionality of control measures. This would include consideration of vaccination programmes impacts on risk at the air border and to the wider New Zealand community.
20. As noted by Dr Nikki Turner in her presentation to Select Committee on 15 March, early data has shown that vaccines are effective in limiting the spread of COVID-19, including from asymptomatic individuals. However, while the roll-out of vaccination to Air New Zealand workers has made a good start, current control measures cannot be relaxed

until we are certain that the majority of the cohort returning from higher risk routes have been vaccinated and that this vaccination is likely to reduce transmission.

21. With this in mind, we propose to provide you with a report on 6 April 2021 that will outline options for improving of the current control measures to address any identified residual risk. The report will contain recommendations on:
 - a. the risk designation of all Air New Zealand scheduled routes;
 - b. any changes to the Key Safety Standards including movement between accommodation and the airport, and any risk presented within accommodation, and adjust the risk assessment tool accordingly;
 - c. whether an amendment should be made to the Air Border Order and the Isolation and Quarantine Order to compel aircrew returning from a higher risk route to isolate in a designated isolation hotel, as well as any legal requirement about restrictions of movements etc within the isolation hotel;
 - d. any changes to the testing surveillance regime for aircrew returning from higher risk routes, including the introduction of day 3-4 testing and the role of saliva testing; and
22. Note that any Order changes resulting from the recommendations of this first review will be included in the Air Border Order amendment omnibus paper due with you on 29 April 2021.
23. We propose that following this initial review of current control measures on 6 April 2021, we provide you with quarterly reviews of all air border control measures against the context of future state settings, including vaccinations and the roll out quarantine free travel zones. The first of these reviews will be provided to you on 6 July 2021.

Equity

24. Consideration of any equity issues that may arise from the proposal to designate many more routes as higher risk will be provided if and when required. This proposals in this briefing are unlikely to have negative impacts on equity, since they are aimed at ensuring the response to COVID-19 remains proportionate to the risk, while minimising potential negative social and economic impacts of control measures.

BORA Assessment

25. Officials consider that a BORA assessment should be completed and included in the advice that is due on 6 April 2021. Essentially the prevalence of COVID-19, risk mitigations on services, the fact people are vaccinated, the level of testing undertaken and other factors would all need to be considered and then a decision made whether it is justifiable from a Bill of Rights perspective to place crew in isolation in different routes in this way, when weighed up with their rights and health and well-being considerations.

Consultation

26. The Ministry of Transport and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment have been consulted on this report. Air New Zealand has contributed to the development of the advice outlined above.

Next steps

27. Officials will report back to you with further advice on the application of the risk assessment tool and the review of current measures on 6 April 2021. Any recommendations arising from this review that will require Order amendments will form part of the briefing on Air Border Order amendments that is scheduled with your office on 29 April 2021.
28. Officials will also provide the first quarterly review against future state settings on 6 July 2021 and then quarterly from there.

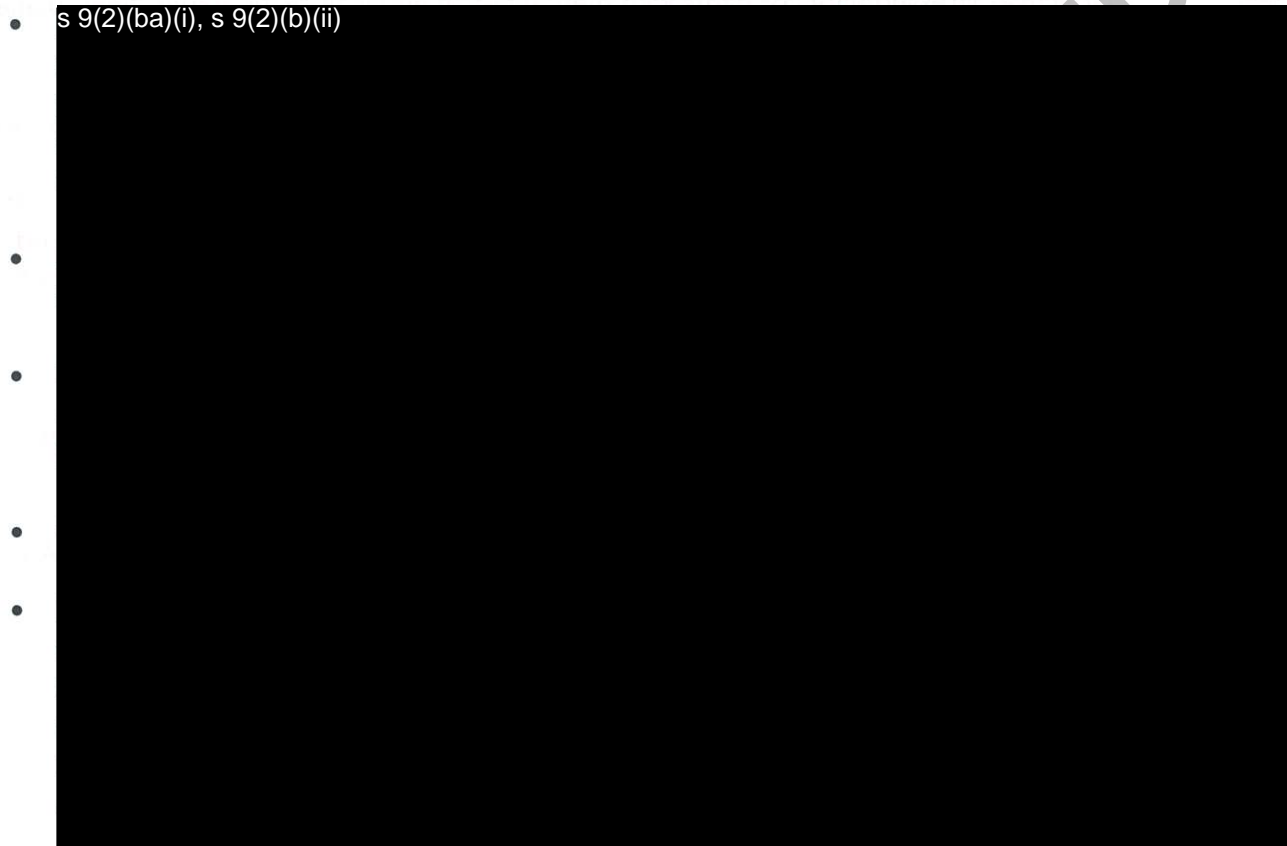
ENDS.

PROACTIVELY RELEASED

Appendix 1: Ministry of Transport – Operational impacts of designating more routes as high-risk

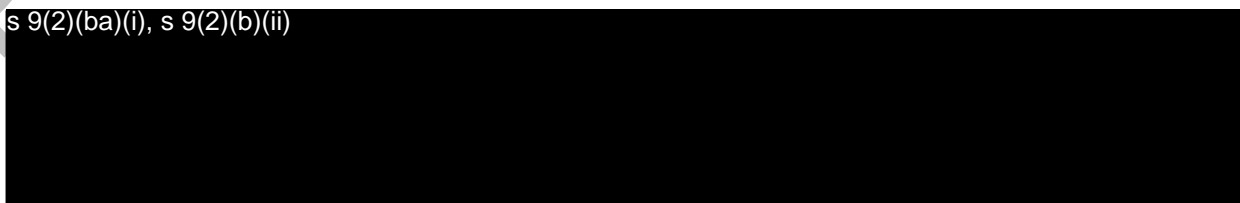
- If more international services are considered higher risk, then Air NZ will have insufficient staff to be able to service routes. This is because Air NZ will require significant numbers of additional staff to be rostered on if its staff need to spend extra time in isolation hotels, and there are likely to be staff that will not fly these routes given the impacts on their family lives and welfare.

- s 9(2)(ba)(i), s 9(2)(b)(ii)



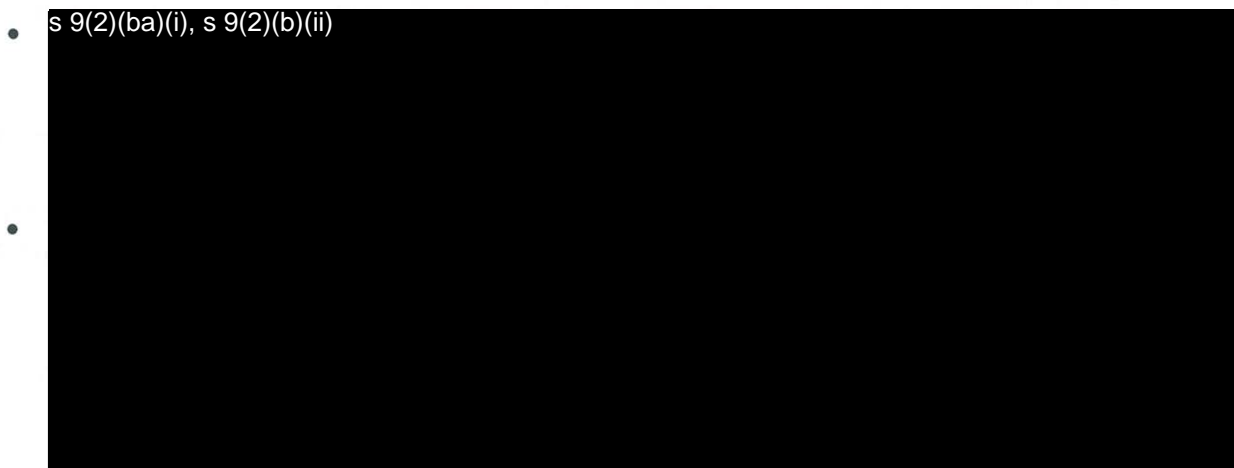
- Importers are also facing difficulty getting key materials from overseas for operation already under the scheme and current services and will face more issues. E.g. Pharmac and Medicines NZ have said with current aviation services there are always around 50 to 100 critical drugs that are running low and they are finding it hard to source and get to NZ, and any reduction in number of air services will create significant issues for them.

- s 9(2)(ba)(i), s 9(2)(b)(ii)



- Staff that fly these routes spend a significant amount of time in isolation in hotels in NZ and overseas (half of any month). This, combined with the fact they do not get to spend much time with their family, and many have also experienced abuse and stigmatisation from the public and their communities, is raising health and safety and well-being concerns for this cohort. Air NZ has said previously that it is not sure it can ask/require its staff to work in these conditions across more routes and that it may simply stop flying some routes, with again the impacts in the bullet above.

- s 9(2)(ba)(i), s 9(2)(b)(ii)



- The prevalence, risk mitigations on services, the fact people are vaccinated, testing etc would all need to be considered and then a decision made whether it is justifiable from a Bill of Rights perspective to place crew in isolation in different routes in this way, when weighed up with their rights and health and well-being considerations. We are also concerned that justice and Bill of Rights issues need to be considered, through a BORA vet.