

Briefing

Quarantine-Free Travel (QFT): Health advice on the potential recommencement of QFT from New South Wales

Date due to MO:	8 May 2021	Action required by:	8 May 2021
Security level:	IN CONFIDENCE	Health Report number:	20211119
To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response		
Copy to:	Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern, Prime Minister Hon Grant Robertson, Deputy Prime Minister Hon Nanaia Mahuta, Minister of Foreign Affairs Hon Michael Wood, Minister of Transport		

Contact for telephone discussion

Name	Position	Telephone
Dr Ashley Bloomfield	Director-General of Health Te Tumu Whakarae mō te Hauora	s 9(2)(a)
Angela Hassan-Sharp	Group Manager, COVID-19 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 Withdrawn | |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:

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Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Date:** 8 May 2021

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

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Hon Grant Robertson, Deputy Prime Minister
Hon Nanaia Mahuta, Minister of Foreign Affairs
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Purpose of report

1. This report provides my advice on the possible recommencement of quarantine-free travel (QFT) flights from New South Wales to New Zealand.

Summary

2. At 2.15pm on 5 May 2021, the Ministry of Health was notified of a locally acquired COVID-19 case identified in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, Australia (Case A) via a phone call from Australian officials to the Office of the Director of Public Health (ODPH). Case A's wife later tested positive on 6 May 2021 (Case B).
3. On 6 May 2021, Ministers decided to pause QFT from New South Wales and a Notice was subsequently issued excluding QFT for travellers who had been in New South Wales on or after 11.59pm on 6 May 2021 (New Zealand time).
4. Direct communication with all 5,999 passengers who have arrived in New Zealand since 30 April 2021 continues. Messaging for passengers on all flights that arrived on 6 May 2021 has been mostly completed - 100 emails are pending.

Latest case information

5. The community cases identified appear to be contained. Since the initial notification of a locally acquired case of COVID-19 and 6 May 2021 advice (HR20211086 refers):
 - a. There have not been any new community cases in New South Wales;
 - b. There have not been any unexpected detections of SARS-CoV-2 fragments in the wastewater testing;
 - c. Community testing levels have been sufficient – a total of 13,339 tests over 24 hours were completed on 6 May 2021 in New South Wales; and

- d. There have not been any changes to the restrictions placed by New South Wales authorities.
6. In addition, the following public health measures have been in place in New Zealand since 7 May 2021:
 - a. A section 70 Notice requiring anybody who has been in a location of interest to self-isolate and get tested; and
 - b. A 'Do Not Board Order' has been prepared and is being used by airlines.
7. The response measures that New South Wales has introduced for the Greater Sydney region (including Wollongong, Central Coast and Blue Mountains) to mitigate the risk of a super-spreader event remain in place until 12:01am Monday 10 May 2021. These restrictions are most comparable to New Zealand's Alert Level 2.
8. There are still no travel restrictions in place in Australia. NSW authorities continue to advise people that were at any locations of interest at the time of concern to isolate and get tested.
9. Testing rates of identified contacts and the general community have been high and the risk of there being undetected community transmission is unlikely. The public health measures instituted by New South Wales provide additional assurance to me.
10. This has assured me that controls are adequately in place on both sides of the Tasman to protect the New Zealand population.

Health Advice

11. I consider that the **public health risk for New Zealand remains low**. There is no evidence that the risk is increasing, and the situation has been stable since Thursday 6 May 2021.
12. Based on the Ministry of Health's 8 May 2021 public health risk assessment and an assessment of the wider factors for consideration [refer Annex 1], **I consider that from 11.59pm Sunday 9 May QFT flights from New South Wales can recommence**. This is pending no significant developments around testing of contact and the community or wastewater results in New South Wales prior to that time.
13. The recommencement date and time will provide me with additional time to consider the latest information. This includes that no further cases emerge from the remaining identified contacts and wider community testing and no unexpected wastewater testing results. This also aligns with the lifting of NSW restrictions at 12.01am on Monday 10 May 2021.
14. Anyone in New Zealand who has been at any of the locations of interest at the specified times should contact Healthline and should be required to self-isolate and be tested as soon as possible. This is covered by the current Section 70 Notice in force since 6 May 2021.
15. Individuals in Australia who were at any of the locations of interest are asked to follow New South Wales health advice regarding isolation and testing and must not travel to New Zealand within 14 days of exposure.
16. Our focus should continue to be on people who were at a location of interest, rather than New South Wales as a whole. The following measures are currently in place:
 - a. Pre-boarding questions regarding locations of interest in New South Wales;

- b. On arrival to New Zealand all passengers are provided with information by Customs staff of the locations of interest and are advised to call Healthline, self-isolate and get tested if they have been at a location of interest during a time of concern between 27 April and 4 May;
 - c. A 'Do Not Board Order' is in place for any travellers associated with existing or newly identified locations of interest; and
 - d. A Section 70 is in place for people currently in New Zealand who were in Sydney between 27 April and 5 May and who were at a location of interest at a time of concern to require them to isolate and be tested.
17. There continues to be daily review of further information received by Australia. A further risk assessment will be completed if the situation changes significantly i.e., if there are any new cases identified.

Recommencing QFT

18. QFT from Australia has been enabled under the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 (the Act) by an exemption under the COVID-19 Public Health Response (Air Border) Order (No 2) 2020 (the Air Border Order) and the COVID-19 Public Health Response (Isolation and Quarantine) Order 2020 (Isolation and Quarantine Order) for travellers from Australia who meet certain eligibility conditions.
19. In order to recommence QFT from New South Wales, you will need to revoke COVID-19 Public Health Response (Exemption for Quarantine-free Travel) Notice (No 4) 2021 (the Notice) and replace it with a new exemption Notice with the additional measures outlined above.
20. Before any decision on recommencement of QFT from New South Wales, you must consult the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Transport. Other relevant Ministers may also be consulted¹.
21. When deciding whether to grant or modify an exemption and what (if any) conditions to impose you must take into account my advice provided above, on the public health implications.

Recommendations

We recommend you:

- a) **Note** that on 6 May 2021 Ministers decided to pause QFT from New South Wales from 11.59pm on 6 May 2021 (New Zealand time). **Noted**
- b) **Note** that as at 12.30pm on 8 May 2021 there have only been two cases associated with the outbreak in New South Wales (Case A and B). **Noted**
- d) **Note** my advice that, based on information available at 12.30pm on 8 May 2021, **I recommend that QFT recommence from New South Wales at 11.59pm on Sunday 9 May 2021 (New Zealand time).** **Noted**

¹ CAB-21-MIN-0101 and cl 26(3A)(a), Air Border Order.

- e) **Agree** to forward this advice to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Transport for consultation. **Yes/No**
- f) **Note** that if you agree with my advice in this Health Report, we will provide you with a new Notice [COVID-19 Public Health Response (Exemption for Quarantine-free Travel) Notice (No 5) 2021], which will give effect to the recommendations above and come into force at 11.59pm on 9 May 2021 (New Zealand time). **Noted**



Dr Ashley Bloomfield
Te Tumu Whakarae mō te Hauora
Director-General of Health

Date:



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

Date: 8/5/2021

PROACTIVELY RELEASED

Quarantine-Free Travel (QFT): Health advice on the potential recommencement of QFT from New South Wales

Background

1. Two-way QFT between New Zealand and Australia began on 19 April 2021. New Zealand and Australia have opened their respective borders on a unilateral basis.
2. In the event of case(s) of COVID-19, decisions on continuation, pauses or suspension are considered independently.
3. New Zealand's response(s) are guided by the Response Framework agreed by Cabinet [CAB-21-MIN-0101]. It is linked to our Elimination Strategy and guided by the policy objectives of keeping COVID-19 out of New Zealand, keeping QFT open and operating if safe, and minimising the impact of any disruption to travellers and operators.
4. At 2.15pm on 5 May 2021, the Ministry of Health was notified of a locally acquired COVID-19 case identified in eastern suburbs of Sydney, Australia (Case A) via a phone call from Australian officials to the Office of the Director of Public Health (ODPH). Case A's wife later tested positive on 6 May 2021 (Case B). Later that day, and based on available information at the time, I recommended that QFT from New South Wales should be not be paused.
5. In the evening of 6 May 2021, based on new evidence and information available, and taking a precautionary approach, I recommended to you that QFT from New South Wales be paused from 11.59pm 6 May 2021, with a review 24 hours later.
6. While the public health risk was low, the situation was still evolving and could have changed as further information became available. At that time, I was also not yet fully assured that controls were adequately in place on both sides of the Tasman to protect the New Zealand population, and the situation was evolving in New South Wales with the possibility of more community cases.
7. A pause would allow further information on the potential source and number of case(s) to be evaluated and minimise the risk of COVID-19 spreading to New Zealand while new information is assessed and a risk-based response to "keep it out" is developed.
8. After consulting the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Transport, you agreed to pause QFT from New South Wales and a Notice was subsequently issued excluding QFT for travellers who had been in New South Wales on or after 11.59pm on 6 May 2021 (New Zealand time).

Latest case information and health assessment

9. Since the initial notification of a locally acquired case of COVID-19 on 5 May 2021 there have been no new cases beyond Case A and B. The cases (Case A and B) appear to be contained and New South Wales has not entered any type of lockdown.

10. Close contacts of Cases A and B are being identified, contacted, tested and advised to isolate. As at 7 May 2021, there are 191 close contacts in total associated with Cases A and B that have been identified to date. As at 1pm 8 May 2021, 179 have returned negative results and 12 results are pending. Australian officials have advised that New South Wales does not collect information about casual contacts.
11. Response measures were introduced for the Greater Sydney region (including Wollongong, Central Coast and Blue Mountains) to mitigate the risk of a super-spreader event. These remain in place until 12:01am Monday 10 May 2021 and include:
 - a. Visitors to households will be limited to 20 guests – including children;
 - b. Masks will be compulsory on public transport and in all public indoor venues, such as retail, theatres, hospitals, aged care facilities and for front-of-house hospitality staff;
 - c. Drinking while standing up at indoor venues will not be allowed;
 - d. Singing by audiences at indoor shows or by congregants at indoor places of worship will not be allowed;
 - e. Dancing will not be allowed at indoor hospitality venues or nightclubs however dancing is allowed at weddings with a strong recommendation that no more than 20 people should be on the dance floor at any one time; and
 - f. Visitors to aged care facilities will be limited to two people.
12. There are still no travel restrictions in place in Australia. NSW authorities continue to advise people that were at any locations of interest at the time of concern to isolate and get tested.
13. Queensland have sent 68,000 text messages to passengers on 63 flights arriving Sydney. Of these, one person self-identified being at a location of interest at a time of concern.
14. Since 6 May 2021, other states and territories are also advising people at any locations of interest (noted as hotspots) at the time of concern to isolate and get tested which is in line with NSW advice.
15. From midnight 6 May 2021, Queensland and Northern Territory are requiring all people who enter who identify as being at a location of interest during the time of concern to enter managed isolation facilities. All other states allow this category of people to isolate at their home/accommodation.
16. South Australia and Tasmania are advising anyone who has been in Sydney since 27 April and are symptomatic to get tested.

Statutory power to grant an exemption

17. The COVID-19 Public Health response (Exemption for Quarantine-free Travel) Notice 2021, which was made under the Air Border Order, and exempts certain people who arrive in New Zealand on a quarantine-free travel flight from the requirements for:
 - a. a confirmed allocation to enter a managed isolation or quarantine facility; and
 - b. isolation or quarantine on arrival.
18. Recommencing QFT would entail revocation of the current exemption in order to remove the condition that travellers must not have been in New South Wales on or after 11.59pm on 6 May 2021 (New Zealand time).

19. You may exempt any person or class of person from the requirement to comply with any provision of the Air Border Order and Isolation and Quarantine Order if you are satisfied that:
 - a. the exemption is necessary and desirable in order to promote the purposes of the Act or Air Border Order; and
 - b. the extent of the exemption is not broader than is reasonably necessary to address the matters giving rise to the exemption.
20. When deciding whether to grant or modify an exemption and what (if any) conditions to impose you must take into account my advice on the public health implications.
21. You must also consult the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Transport before any decision on recommencement of QFT. Other relevant Ministers may also be consulted [CAB-21-MIN-0101].

Public health advice

22. My advice on recommencing QFT from New South Wales is set out above.
23. You are also receiving ongoing advice about the risks associated with COVID-19. In accordance with section 9(2) of the COVID-19 Act, you may have regard to that advice without it being repeated here. COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease which may be spread by people who are not showing symptoms. This supports significant intervention measures for those at heightened risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19.

Promotion of the purposes of the Act and the Air Border Order

24. Section 4 outlines the Act's purpose as supporting a public health response to COVID-19 that:
 - a. prevents, and limits the risk of, the outbreak or spread of COVID-19 (taking into account the infectious nature and potential for asymptomatic transmission of COVID-19); and
 - b. avoids, mitigates, or remedies the actual or potential adverse effects of the COVID-19 outbreak (whether direct or indirect); and
 - c. is co-ordinated, orderly, and proportionate; and
 - d. allows social, economic, and other factors to be taken into account where it is relevant to do so; and
 - e. is economically sustainable and allows for the recovery of managed isolation and quarantine facility (MIQF) costs; and
 - f. has enforceable measures, in addition to the relevant voluntary measures and public health and other guidance that also support that response.
25. The purpose of the Air Border Order is "to prevent, and limit the risk of, the outbreak or spread of COVID-19 by imposing certain requirements on persons arriving in New Zealand by air (including medical examination and testing for COVID-19, and commencement of isolation and quarantining, as soon as is practicable after arriving in New Zealand)."

26. The proposed recommencement of QFT from New South Wales promotes the purposes of the Act and the Air Border Order as it will mean travellers from New South Wales, as well as other states and territories in Australia, who meet the general QFT eligibility requirements and the new additional requirements, will not be subject to managed isolation or quarantine on arrival in New Zealand. Recommencement will also re-enable social, cultural and economic activities between New Zealand and New South Wales.

New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990

27. The exemption discretion must be exercised consistently with the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (NZBORA), and in particular the right of citizens to enter New Zealand. The recommencement of QFT would allow the realisation of that right by most citizens currently offshore in New South Wales. However, you need to be satisfied that the public health risk justifies limiting the right to return of citizens who are close and casual contacts.
28. s 9(2)(h)

Equity

29. The recommencement of QFT will allow most New Zealand citizens, residents and visa holders who have been in New South Wales on or after 11.59pm on 6 May 2021 (New Zealand time) to return to New Zealand.

Exemption Notice

30. Should you agree with my advice, I will provide you with an Exemption Notice for you to sign. This will modify the current exemption for travellers from Australia (including New South Wales) from isolation and quarantine on arrival by only excluding travellers who have been at a location of interest and have not yet self-isolated for 14 days or those that have been in a location of interest and cannot provide evidence of a negative COVID-19 test before departure for New Zealand. The Notice will be in force until revoked.

Next steps

31. If you sign the Notice, QFT will recommence from Australia (all states and territories, including New South Wales) for travellers who meet the required eligibility requirements, from 11.59pm on Sunday 9 May 2021 (New Zealand time).
32. Agencies, through the National Leadership Response Team (NLRT) and the Response Framework will operationalise the recommencement.

ENDS.

Annex 1 – Public health risk assessment as at 12.30pm 8 May 2021

		Yes	No / Unclear	Comment
1.	Can we rule out the cases in the QFT partner jurisdiction being in contact with people who might travel to NZ?	Yes, as much as we can		<p>Australian officials have expressed concern that there is a possible undetected intermediary case.</p> <p>It is important to note that there is potential that this will never be able to be ruled out.</p> <p>Of all approximately 5,500 people that have been contacted, none have self-identified as being at a location of interest.</p> <p>One close contact has been notified to us from National Focal Point of Australia – who returned a negative initial result on 7 May 2021.</p>
2.	Is the area of concern restricted to a small or local area? (e.g. is it a small rural town, or a large metropolitan city)?	Yes		<p>Case A lives in the eastern Sydney suburb of Woollahra and visited a number of locations across Sydney City and works in Sydney City.</p> <p>Case B has been fully scoped. It is known that Case B has not left the Sydney region. Only a few locations of interest have been identified and it is noted that she was minimally infectious while in the community.</p>
3.	Has a likely source been identified?		No	<p>Case A has no recent overseas travel history nor any connections to the border or hospital.</p> <p>Whole genome sequencing of Case A shows B.1.617.2 which is a variant under investigation. They are genomically linked to a recent returnee case identified in a managed isolation facility.</p>

				<p>Australian officials have expressed concern that there is a possible undetected intermediary case.</p> <p>Source investigation is ongoing which includes CCTV footage review of returnee case in the MIF/Q, locations of interest published prior to infectious period and wastewater testing.</p>
4.	Can we confirm that community transmission is not widespread in the QFT partner jurisdiction?		No	<p>It has been 10+ days since potential exposure to the source. No other cases have been identified. It has been 7+ days since Case A was infectious in the community. Therefore, no evidence of community transmission.</p> <p>Australian officials have expressed concern that there is a possible undetected intermediary case. It is to be noted that this would imply a short window of incubation period for the undetected intermediary case and Case A. This seems less likely now.</p> <p>13,339 tests were completed in total on 6 May 2021 over 24 hours in NSW. Over the last 7 days as at 1200hrs 7 May, NSW completed 881 tests per 100,000 which is below the national 1,102 per 100,000 for the same period.</p> <p>Wastewater testing in an area of Sydney representing wastewater from around 42,000 people returned a positive result which is unexplained. There are no unexpected sewage detections. Community testing increased in response.</p> <p>There was one detection at the Paddington sewage network site. However, the catchment for</p>

				this site includes the city and quarantine hotels.
5.	Have we been able to rule out any high-risk locations of interest (i.e. "super-spreader" events)?	Yes		There is no current indication Case A or B have been at a super-spreader event
6.	Can we confirm that all cases were only infectious in the community for a brief period of time?		No	<p>Case A is deemed to have been infectious since Friday 30 April. A total of 5 days.</p> <p>Case B is deemed to have been infectious since Monday 3 May and started self-isolation on 5 May upon detection of Case A. A total of 2 days.</p> <p>As at 12pm 6 May, locations of interest in the community are from dates Friday 30 April to Tuesday 4 May.</p>
7.	Have we been able to determine that the cases involved were not very infectious while in the community? (e.g. post vaccination, or test results showing weak positive or historical case)		No	<p>Case A's test result returned on Wednesday 5 May 2021 had a low Ct value of 16 (tested on 2 platforms).</p> <p>Case B is interpreted as having an early infection and therefore deemed to be minimally infectious while in the community.</p> <p>Case B's positive test result on 5 May had a high Ct value of 38. A repeat test completed on 6 May resulted positive with a lower Ct value of 18. Case B's infection is interpreted as an early infection and is deemed to be minimally infectious by Australian Health Officials.</p>
8.	If more than one case, have we been able to determine how they are linked? I.e. have we been able to rule out that there are undetected cases in the community?	Yes		Case B, a close household contact, is currently thought to have been exposed from Case A.