

Briefing

Quarantine-Free Travel Zone with Australia: Key Lessons and Process Improvements

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To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response		
Copy:	Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall, Associate Minister of Health		

Contact for telephone discussion

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Minister's office to complete:

- ☐ Approved
☐ Needs change
☐ See Minister's Notes
Comment:

- ☐ Decline
☐ Seen
☐ Withdrawn

- ☐ Noted
☐ Overtaken by events

Quarantine-Free Travel Zone with Australia: Key Lessons and Process Improvements

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Date:** 10 June 2021

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

Copy: Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall, Associate Minister of Health

Purpose of report

1. This briefing summarises key learnings from recent Quarantine-Free Travel (QFT) incidents and identifies key actions that have been taken to strengthen QFT and streamline decision making in response to these learnings.

Summary

2. QFT between Australia and New Zealand was announced on 6 April 2021 and commenced at 11:59pm on 18 April 2021.
3. Since being established, there have been six QFT incidents which required the Incident Management Team (IMT) to stand up within the Ministry of Health (the Ministry) to respond, including:
 - a. Grand Mercure Perth in-facility transmission Case 23 April 2021
 - b. Passenger breach at Brisbane Airport 29 April 2021
 - c. Grand Mercure Perth Case (Border Worker) 2 May 2021
 - d. Community Sydney Case 5 May 2021
 - e. Community Melbourne Case 11 May 2021
 - f. QFT Melbourne Outbreak 24 May 2021 (current).
4. COVID-19 response and border agencies are committed to continuous improvement and identifying lessons learned from each response to a QFT incident. This briefing outlines key learnings from QFT incidents to-date, including how these learnings have informed actions to strengthen the QFT system, better inform decision making, and improve the overall response to COVID-19 to keep our communities safe. These learnings will inform longer-term system-wide improvements and will support continued refinement of our processes as more QFT arrangements are established.

Recommendations

We recommend you:

- a) **Note** since Quarantine-Free Travel between Australia and New Zealand commenced at 11.59pm on 18 April 2021, there have been six incidents which required the Incident Management Team to stand up
- b) **Note** cross-agency debriefs to assess the effectiveness of the Government's response to Quarantine-Free Travel incidents have identified key learnings relating to information sharing, decision-making, pace of policy decisions and legislative drafting, contact tracing and workforce resilience
- c) **Note** the debriefs mentioned in recommendation (b) above have informed actions to strengthen the Quarantine-Free Travel system, better inform and support streamlined decision-making, support necessary legal mechanisms being put in place as quickly as possible, and ensure workforce resilience
- d) **Note** the actions taken to improve Quarantine-Free Travel were effective in responding to the latest incident in Victoria and officials will use lessons identified to support continuous improvement as well as the establishment of any future QFT arrangements



Sue Gordon

Deputy Chief Executive

COVID-19 Health System Response

Date: 10.06.21



Cheryl Barnes

Deputy Chief Executive

COVID-19 Group

Date: 10.06.21



Hon Chris Hipkins

Minister for COVID-19 Response

Date: 22 / 06 / 2021

I commended officials for the proactive nature of this work, and encourage you to invite Sir Brian Roche's group to provide peer review and feedback.

Quarantine-Free Travel Zone with Australia: Key Learnings and Process Improvements

Since the establishment of QFT with Australia there have been six incidents

5. QFT between Australia and New Zealand commenced at 11:59pm on 18 April 2021, after extensive preparation work had been undertaken by the Ministry, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), and other agencies.
6. Many things have gone well since the establishment of QFT with Australia, evidenced through New Zealand having no identified community cases in relation to QFT. However, as part of agencies' commitment to continuous improvement this briefing focuses on process improvements made in response to lessons identified. Agencies continue to reflect on each response and adapt as required to strengthen QFT arrangements.
7. Since the establishment of QFT with Australia there have been six incidents that have required the IMT to stand up. Each incident is listed below, with a detailed overview of each provided in Appendix One:
 - a. Grand Mercure Perth in-facility transmission Case 23 April 2021
 - b. Passenger breach at Brisbane Airport 29 April 2021
 - c. Grand Mercure Perth Case (Border Worker) 2 May 2021
 - d. Community Sydney Case 5 May 2021
 - e. Community Melbourne Case 11 May 2021
 - f. QFT Melbourne outbreak 24 May 2021 (current).
8. Through responding to these incidents, officials have been able to identify which aspects of the QFT response framework (attached as Appendix Two) work well and where there are opportunities for improvement. Key learnings have informed actions that have already been taken to improve QFT processes and will also be used to inform the establishment of any future QFT arrangements.

Post-incident debriefs have identified several lessons and opportunities for improvement that have been actioned

9. Various inter and intra-agency debriefs have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of the Government's response to QFT incidents.¹
10. Key lessons identified in these debriefs relate to:
 - a. Communications and information sharing
 - b. Streamlining decision making

¹ Debriefs included a Ministry debrief following the first QFT pause (April 2021), a "hot debrief" into the Ministry responses held by IMT (May 2021), a DPMC facilitated cross-agency workshop (April 2021), an assessment of responses by Contact Tracing (April 2021), Ministry-led meeting with DPMC to improve policy decisions and legislative drafting (May 2021).

- c. Pace of policy decisions and legislative drafting
- d. Communications with returnees and contact tracing
- e. Workforce resilience.

Communications and information sharing

11. While the Unite Against COVID-19 website, social channels and stakeholder engagement are seen as reliable QFT information sources by several audiences,² QFT response debriefs found that information sharing about QFT incidents across agencies could be more immediate and focused. Early notification of the incident and onward notification to other agencies was found to be critical to the management and success of any response. To facilitate better information sharing and activation of the response, officials have compiled a cross-agency contact list for senior officials, which was used during the latest incident response.
12. s 6(a) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Regular public health and intelligence information sharing meetings between Australia and New Zealand have been implemented to share experiences and review processes. In addition, it has been agreed that, where appropriate, the Office of the Director of Public Health will contact Australian State or Territories directly to seek non-public information quickly.
13. Ensuring government contact centres (e.g. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's Immigration NZ contact centre) and foreign affairs posts were provided with information in the early stages of a response, while more detailed information and guidance is being developed, was also noted as an area for improvement. In response, officials have pre-developed a range of external communications (e.g. holding messages for government contact centres), alongside early and clear notification processes to inform airlines during any future developing situation.
14. Previously mentioned debriefs also found that communications to travellers utilising QFT arrangements could be enhanced. Officials have amended communications to help the public understand their responsibilities and the options available for non-compliance (especially around the contact information declaration form Nau Mai Rā, which supports contact tracing). This includes improving the prominence of messaging related to the Nau Mai Rā and the health declaration on agency websites, including the Unite Against COVID website, and targeted advertising responses in various markets.

Streamlining decision making

15. Timely decision making after notification of an incident was found to be crucial to an effective response, meaning a public health risk assessment and broader system advice is likely required within hours of agencies being notified of an incident without a comprehensive picture of the situation at hand.

² The Unite Against COVID-19 website is considered a crucial source of information for media, stakeholders (including iwi and ethnic communities), Unite Against COVID-19 social community, AoG agencies, and people in New Zealand and Australia. The website is also used as an official source of information for travellers and airlines, which has prompted a new status board feature being added to the website – linking to key messages under each status, such as links to locations of interest. The social channel provides timely and accurate information about QFT issues experienced by the public.

16. This urgency has made it difficult to determine whether the threshold was met to pause flights, resulting in uncertainty on the status of flights due to depart Australia, which had flow on effects for airlines and border agencies. In response, QFT response agencies updated the public health risk assessment framework to better inform decision-making and provide timely advice. This framework to be used for future QFT incidents, including if we enter into future QFT arrangements with other countries while ensuring it can be adapted. It is being used with some minor adjustments for the Cook Islands.
17. The Ministry has continued to enhance its operational process planning across public health, and key response agencies such as DMPC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Ministry of Transport. These enhancements strengthen collective agreement about agencies' roles and responsibilities in potential scenarios (such as repatriation) to ensure that any responses are timely and appropriate to the situation.
18. Ensuring preparedness for various scenarios is also required to support timely decision making. Having legal templates (discussed below) and pre-prepared communications (which have been drafted) for a range of QFT scenarios will support preparedness and decision-making timeliness in future. DPMC are also developing more detailed criteria for making decisions about when to suspend flights (as opposed to pausing).
19. The National Response Group (NRG) and National Response Leadership Team (NRLT) play a critical role in providing broader system advice as part of a QFT incident response, considering factors relating to transport, compliance, social license, communications and operations. Since April 2021, several changes have been made to NRG and NRLT's decision-making processes to ensure the public health and system advice chains are developed and provided to the Minister for COVID-19 Response in parallel, ensuring robust advice to support decision making. Specific changes include:
 - a. Refining the checklist used to develop system-focused advice
 - b. Options to hold NRG and NRLT meetings by exception to expediate decision-making
 - c. Clarifying triggers for QFT suspension and balancing speed of decision-making with quality of advice
 - d. Expanded membership of the NRG so that it now includes the Parliamentary Counsel Office (PCO), policy staff from the Ministry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Transport, Customs and Immigration officials.

Pace of policy decisions and legislative drafting

20. As the Ministry develops its public health advice and considers the appropriate response, several policy decisions and legal instruments need to be developed in parallel to ensure appropriate legal grounds to implement any public health measures. These include any required amendments to the COVID-19 Public Health Response (Exemptions and Conditions for Quarantine-Free Travel) Notice 2021 (for example, to pause QFT), section 11 Orders under the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020, and directions issued under section 70 of the Health Act 1956.

21. Officials have learnt through previous responses that, as with Alert Level changes, being clear about agency roles and responsibilities in relation to QFT situations is critically important when a response is being developed at pace. In this context, agencies have agreed that the Ministry is the responsible agency for providing policy advice when considering pauses or recommencements following pauses. For the latest QFT incident, DPMC led advice on the implementation of managed return flights from Melbourne because of DPMC's coordinating role, and due to limited capacity in relevant sector agencies on the day the advice was due.
22. To support rapid advice development and decision-making, the Ministry is working to pre-specify standard public health measures for dealing with QFT situations (e.g. putting in place pauses or recommencements with public health conditions). The Ministry has also developed a single document for assessing both the public health risk and possible measures to respond to QFT situations.
23. Agencies are also working closely with PCO to pre-draft legal provisions for each of the legislative instruments mentioned above as appropriate, so these can be quickly implemented if any public health measures need to be imposed (e.g. a pause). This includes ready-to-use templates for exemptions (such as those for air crew and diplomats).
24. A streamlined advice and decision-making process has also been implemented and was used in the context of the decision to pause QFT following the latest QFT incident:
- a. A daily public health risk assessment meeting is convened to determine the public health risk in response to an incident. This is made up of public health experts and the Ministry's Chief Scientist and results in a risk assessment report when required
 - b. The public health risk assessment report informs the policy process and advice, and is approved by the Director of Public Health and the Director-General of Health, then provided to the Minister for COVID-19 Response to inform decisions after undertaking the required Ministerial consultation³
 - c. Following the Minister for COVID-19 Response's decision, the Ministry then develops drafting instructions and works with PCO to implement necessary legal instruments.
25. NRG and NRLT meet in parallel to the above-mentioned process, enabling system advice to be provided at the same time as public health advice at step b of the above decision-making process.
26. By clarifying standard public health measures, clarifying roles and responsibilities in pausing or suspending QFT, and working with PCO to pre-draft provisions for any necessary legal instruments, the speed and accuracy of the responses should continue to improve over time. Officials also continue to learn and adapt our response to each specific QFT context and situation, and professional public health judgement is always required to ensure a proportionate public health response. While these factors can slow the response somewhat, they also help to ensure that the Government always responds

³ With the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Transport (as required by clause 26(3A)(a) of the COVID-19 Public Health Response (Air Border) Order (No 2) 2020).

consistently with its intent as set out under the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020.

27. There is a need to ensure decisions to pause or recommence QFT flights follow the correct decision-making process. The COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 requires a public health response to be co-ordinated, orderly, and proportionate. You must be satisfied that any decision under the Act takes into account public health advice from the Director-General and does not limit or are a justified limit on the rights and freedoms in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990. Making decisions in the absence of advice on these matters could expose the Crown to legal risk.

Returnee communication and contact tracing processes have improved

28. In advance of QFT, the National Investigation and Tracing Centre (NITC) reviewed contact tracing and returnee communication capacity and capability in relation to QFT and the potential for follow up of contacts and/or returning traveller groups.
29. It was identified that accurate contact details for travellers was critical to ensure timely identification and follow-up of any passengers in the instance of a possible QFT incident. The NITC worked closely with Immigration New Zealand (INZ, MBIE) to develop Nau Mai Rā (the mandatory passenger declaration form), which has greatly assisted in contacting over 15,000 contacts as part of our response to incidents. The operational processes that the NITC has developed allow for direct communication with passengers who have come from an area where there is a case or a potential outbreak. This mitigates the risk of people in New Zealand not being aware of the testing and isolation requirements.
30. The NITC implemented changes to the National Contact Tracing Solution (NCTS) to enable automated emails to be sent to travellers who are in New Zealand and may have been in a place where there is a community case.
31. Two new processes have been developed to support QFT:
- a. An email may be sent to all travellers arriving on specified flights to ask them to check if they have been at any location of interest in the country of departure, prior to their arrival in New Zealand. The email also provides advice about symptoms, and what to do if symptoms develop. In addition, these travellers will be asked to call Healthline if they self-identify that they were at a location of interest at the times specified by the responsible health authority. This email system has been automated to enable this communication to be sent at high volumes as needed.
 - b. An email may be sent to all travellers arriving on specified flights, with a link to a wellbeing questionnaire, asking people to proactively check for COVID-19 symptoms. If no response is received after 24 hours, a second email will be sent with a link to the same wellness questionnaire. Dependant on further clinical advice, if there is still no response after 24 hours of the second email, an attempt may be made to contact the traveller by phone.
32. At all stages of the returnee notification process, phone calls can be made to travellers. A public health assessment will determine the most appropriate process to use and which travellers need to be followed up based on the level of public health risk. The Office of the Director of Public Health determines what level of contacts are contacted (e.g. close, casual) based on a risk-assessment.

33. Contact details of travellers from the region of the outbreak collected through Nau Mai Rā are checked against the border records in the National Border Solution (NBS) then imported into the NCTS. This process was automated from 20 May 2021.
34. For travellers who have been asked to get a test, the NITC monitors test results and manages these according to their contact categorisation.
35. The Ministry is currently working through options to automate the 'Quarantine free' classification of incoming flights from QFT countries. This is following two incoming flights from Melbourne that had incorrectly been classified as 'Red-Zone' flights rather than 'Quarantine free' flights. This resulted in the NITC not picking up on the two flights when contract tracing was undertaken for Melbourne flights. All passengers have now been contacted and the issue resolved, however the automation of classification of QFT flights will prevent this issue from occurring again.

Workforce resilience

36. A need to increase the resilience and sustainability of our response workforce has also been identified, as the same people are often called upon to work over weekends to respond to incidents. The Ministry has always had a 7-day rolling roster, however now DPMC's COVID-19 Group will also be implementing a 7-day rotating roster of people on-call on the weekends who will be available to respond to a QFT incident (or other urgent COVID-19 matter) should one occur.
37. DPMC's COVID-19 Group has recruited an additional Response Manager and is making arrangements for key back-ups, by providing training and documenting key process steps for alternative contact people to rely on. Other agencies have introduced a 7-days per week single point of contact, to enable quick identification of who is best placed to respond to an incident from each agency.
38. Despite these actions, the current QFT approach requires significant resources to establish and then manage responses to outbreaks in those countries and is considered unsustainable beyond these initial incidents. This also needs to be considered in the context of QFT with multiple jurisdictions (Australia, Cook Islands and Niue) alongside a possible New Zealand-based response; these incidents would require resource from the same response workforce.

Next steps

39. Return green flights from Melbourne commenced on 9 June 2021, enabling eligible New Zealanders stranded in Melbourne to return home without quarantining. Officials will continue to review and plan for future QFT pauses, including those that may require managed return flights.
40. The Ministry is working with DPMC and other agencies on a framework for reconnecting New Zealand with other jurisdictions whilst ensuring public health measures are not compromised, in line with the Elimination Strategy. This work is being done in a principles-based, systematic way to design an approach to future travel including travel that may be quarantine free, in a way that minimises risk and makes any further QFT arrangements sustainable and less resource-intensive.
41. The Border Executive Board, as part of its rapid review of QFT implementation for Australia, has also sought feedback from agencies on what is going well and what could be

improved. This review will be used to inform any further learnings or improvements with a system-wide perspective.

42. COVID-19 Response and border agencies will continue to assess processes and policies and make improvements where possible as part of the commitment to a continuous learnings system.

ENDS.

PROACTIVELY RELEASED

Appendix 1: Summary of QFT incidents and responses to date

Incident	Overview	Number of people impacted	How we responded
Grand Mercure Perth in-facility transmission Case (April 2021)	<p>On 23 April 2021 the Ministry was advised via the National Focal Point of a positive COVID-19 case identified in Victoria Australia following travel from Perth to Melbourne on 22 April 2021.</p> <p>The leading hypothesis is that the source of infection was in-MIF transmission whilst completing 14 days isolation at a Perth isolation facility.</p>	<p>The National Investigation and Tracing Centre (NITC) sent an email to all passengers that had arrived from Perth to New Zealand between 19 -23 April 2021.</p> <p>634 emails were sent, asking people to call Healthline if they had been at a location of interest.</p> <p>5 Casual Plus contacts were identified, four of which returned a negative test and one that did not need a test following clinical advice.</p>	<p>Paused travel into New Zealand from the state of Western Australia for at least three days.</p> <p>Based on IMT risk assessments, flights to Western Australia were recommenced on 27 April, with measures and checks of locations of interest continued at the border for a further 14 days.</p>
Passenger breach at Brisbane Airport 29 April 2021	<p>Air NZ were advised by Brisbane Airport Company (BAC) of a breach of the green/red zone areas at Brisbane airport on 29 April 2021. It was identified that three transit passengers from Papua New Guinea had entered the green zone departure area where Air NZ customers were preparing to board their flights.</p> <p>The three red transit passengers were not under escort on their arrival by either the airline or ground staff and were in the green zone for approximately 1.5 hours.</p>	<p>The NITC contacted 396 passengers in total. 25 casual plus contacts were identified, all of which returned a negative test.</p> <p>All three red transit passengers provided evidence of a negative COVID-19 test that had been undertaken in the 24 hours prior. They all returned a further negative test.</p>	<p>Queensland Health in-conjunction with BAC assessed the situation and allowed NZ202 and NZ146 flights to depart Brisbane as per schedule.</p> <p>The Ministry completed an assessment which determined it was appropriate to let the planes land in New Zealand. Everyone who had been on the plane was advised to contact Healthline if any COVID-19 symptoms developed or they had been at any locations of interest.</p>
Grand Mercure Perth (Border Worker) Case (May 2021)	<p>2 May 2021 - the Office of the Director of Public Health was notified of a border worker at the Grand Mercure Perth isolation facility along with two</p>	<p>New Zealand's NITC emailed 857 passengers that had travelled from Perth to New Zealand between 27 April – 1 May 2021.</p>	<p>No regional lockdown - the risk of ongoing transmission was deemed low due to the cases being caught early as well as tightened public health measures</p>

household members as confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Whole Genome Sequencing confirmed that the cases were closely linked to guests at the isolation facility.

Community Sydney Case (May 2021)

On 5 May 2021, the Ministry was notified by the Australian health authorities of a positive community COVID-19 case in the eastern suburbs of Sydney.

The individual had not recently travelled from overseas, did not work in any border settings and did not have any contact with workers in hospital settings. The individual had been 'very active' in the community, with 20 close contacts, and had been infectious for approximately five days.

Community Melbourne Case (May 2021)

On 11 May 2021, the Ministry was notified by the Australian health authorities of a positive community case in Melbourne. The individual had recently returned to Australia from overseas on 19 April 2021 and had completed 14 days in an isolation facility in Adelaide. Negative test results had been returned on days 1, 5, 9 and 13 of their stay. The individual flew from Adelaide to Melbourne (their home) on 4 May 2021.

On 8 May 2021, the individual developed COVID-19 symptoms, was tested on 10

No contacts were identified as being at a location of interest.

All previous arrivals within the contagious period were contacted by the NITC utilising Nau Mai Rā (the traveller declaration form) data, outlining criteria for being subject to the New South Wales self-isolation order 2021.

5,477 passengers were contacted, with one passenger being identified as a Close Contact. This person was transferred to a MIF and subsequently returned negative COVID-19 tests.

The following advice was provided to 4,261 travellers from the NITC (for a period of 14 days)

- 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 requires the appropriate legal authority to be in place, i.e. a Section 70 notice.

that were put in place in Perth following a previous Perth case in April.

Two Air New Zealand Flights set to depart Perth to New Zealand that day did not operate. This was Air New Zealand's decision, as the risk assessment was not yet complete.

Paused travel from Sydney to New Zealand for three days, in-line with decisions from Sydney Health authorities.

Following regular IMT risk assessments, it was agreed to recommence QFT flights to Sydney on 9 May 2021 with measures and checks of locations of interest continued at the border for a further 14 days.

Due to a low public health risk, no pause was recommended or put in place in response to this case.

**Community
Melbourne
Outbreak (May
2021)**

**This response is
ongoing, and
information is
accurate as at 9 June
2021*

May, and subsequently returned two positive test results on 11 May 2021. The case was considered to be infectious from 6 May 2021 onwards (a time period which does not include the return flight from Adelaide to Melbourne).

- Individuals in Australia who were at any of the locations of interest are asked to follow Victoria health advice regarding isolation and testing and MUST not travel to New Zealand within 14 days of exposure.
- Individuals who were NOT at a location of interest ARE permitted to travel to New Zealand.

Two Casual Plus contacts were identified and subsequently returned negative results.

On 24 May 2021, the Ministry was notified of four positive community cases in Melbourne.

Genomic sequencing did not automatically link these cases to known infections but was subsequently identified as linked to the 11 May 2021 case.

As at 9 June 2021, a total of 85 cases are being reported by Australian authorities.

As at 9 June 2021, the NITC has sent over 15,000 emails (approximately 10,000 on 25 May, and 5,000 on 27 May). Follow-up is ongoing.

On 25 May 2021, the decision was made to pause QFT with Victoria, effective 7:59pm. At the same time, Section 70s were issued requiring travellers who had been at a place of interest to isolate, contact Healthline and get tested.

On 27 May 2021, a further section 70 was issued, requiring any person who was in the Greater Melbourne area between 20-25 May 2021 to isolate and get tested.

On 28 May 2021, a new section 70 was issued extending the requirement for arrivals from the State of Victoria to isolate and get tested.

In addition, a negative pre-departure test was required for travellers who have been in the state of Victoria on or after 20 May 2021 arriving from anywhere in Australia.

Appendix 2: System Process Map

Please note that this is an updated version to what is published in the National Response Plan Q2 2021

DRAFT

QFT System Process Map

We have refined our system process map for the Cook Islands and Australia

KEY

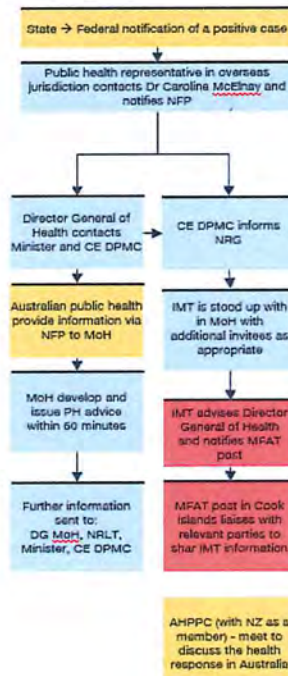
All countries

Australia only

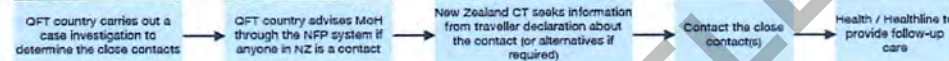
Cook Islands only



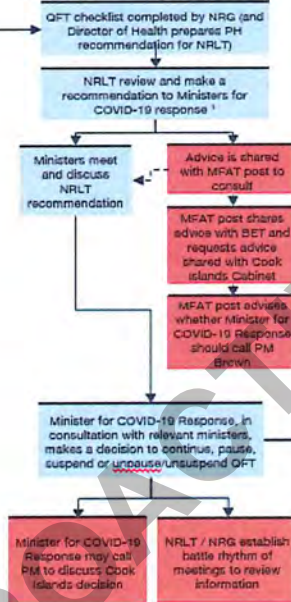
Notifications



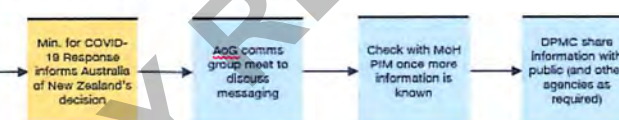
Contact Tracing



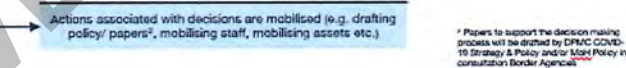
Decision Making



External Communications



Other operationalisation²



Managed return journey in suspended state (Amber flights - last resort tactic for Australia, potential early tactic in Cook Islands)



New Zealand Government
Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa

¹ Groups to be notified of the recommended action:

- PCID Crown Unit (TCU)
- Regional leaders
- Local govt
- NEMA
- CAC

- Transport
- Airport and aviation security
- Tourism NZ/Tourism Industry Association
- Insurance
- QFT partners (MFAT)