

Briefing

Trans-Tasman Quarantine-Free Travel (QFT): Health advice on the potential continuation of the pause of QFT from Victoria

Date due to MO: 10 June 2021 **Action required by:** 10 June 2021

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Health Report number:** 20211363

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	s 9(2)(a)
Sue Gordon	Deputy Chief Executive, Health System Response	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 Withdrawn | |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:

Trans-Tasman Quarantine-Free Travel (QFT): Health advice on the potential continuation of the pause on QFT from Victoria

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

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

Purpose of report

1. This report provides my advice on the possible continuation of the pause on quarantine-free travel (QFT) from Victoria to New Zealand as at 10 June 2021.

Summary

2. On 25 May 2021, you decided to pause QFT flights from Victoria for an initial period of 3 days and a Notice was subsequently issued excluding QFT for travellers who had been in Victoria 7:59pm on 25 May 2021 (New Zealand time). Since then, you have agreed to continue the pause twice, with a further review on Wednesday 9 June 2021.

Latest case information

3. There are now 93 cases associated with the greater Melbourne outbreak, separated into four clusters, with over 15,000 'close contacts' identified (which are equivalent to New Zealand's classifications of close plus and close contacts).
 - i. The case with the earliest symptom onset in this outbreak was 17 May 2021. This case was reported on 25 May 2021 and was identified through contact tracing.
 - ii. There has been a gradual decline in the daily number of cases reported since the last decision to extend the pause, with four new cases reported on Thursday, 10 June 2021 in Victoria.
 - iii. Two additional cases associated with the greater Melbourne outbreak have been reported outside Victoria. On 9 June 2021, Queensland reported a locally-acquired case involving a woman in her 40s who drove with her husband from Melbourne to the Sunshine Coast, departing after the city went into lockdown. The couple visited several places on their way home in both New South Wales and Queensland. The woman started displaying symptoms on 3 June 2021 and is presumed to have been infectious since 1 June 2021. Her husband tested positive for COVID-19 on 10 June. Both are isolating with their family in Queensland.

- iv. The cases in the greater Melbourne outbreak are genomically linked to cases arriving from overseas but there are at least three cases where an epidemiological link is still to be confirmed.

Date cases reported	Number of cases	Number of Tests
25 May	4	14,892
26 May	10	26,180
27 May	12	40,411
28 May	4	47,462
29 May	5	56,624
30 May	5	45,301
31 May	5	43,874
1 June	9	42,699
2 June	6	51,033
3 June	3	57,519
4 June	4	49,439
5 June	5	36,362
6 June	2	29,816
7 June	11	24,265
8 June	2	22,814
9 June	1	28,485
10 June	4	23,670

- v. Most of the greater Melbourne cases were already isolating during the infectious period, with the remainder considered to be from a low risk exposure site. The last people in the current cluster were in the community on 5 June 2021.
- vi. There are four distinct clusters that have occurred in recent days across greater Melbourne –

1. **North Melbourne Primary School/North Melbourne (15 cases)**

All of these cases are of the delta variant and have been genomically linked to an overseas acquired case that arrived in Australia on 8 May 2021, tested positive on the same day and was released from quarantine on 23 May 2021.

2. **Whittlesea Community (32 cases)**

This and the following clusters have all been identified as the Kappa variant (B.1.617.1).

3. **Port Melbourne Workplace (32 cases)**

4. **Arcare Maidstone Aged Care (10 cases)**

4. Aside from the new cases reported in Queensland on Wednesday 9 June 2021, no other cases have been reported in other states, including New South Wales, where a confirmed case visited in late May.
5. Extensive contact tracing continues. COVID-19 exposure sites (or 'locations of interest') are still being published and updated daily. Some of the sites where the exposure date is more than 14 days old have been removed, and as of 9 June 2021 there are only 161 locations of interest, down from 370.

Australian response to the greater Melbourne outbreak

6. In response to the greater Melbourne outbreak, the Victorian government instigated a seven-day Alert Level 3 lock-down which was due to end at 11:59pm on 3 June 2021, applying across the state. On 2 June 2021, the Victorian government announced that the lock-down would be extended for greater Melbourne by a further period of seven days. However, the restrictions in regional Victoria were eased on 11:59pm on 3 June 2021.
7. Victoria announced on 9 June 2021 that lockdown restrictions will ease from 11 June 2021, but with some continuing restrictions in place in greater Melbourne; such as limits on gatherings, restaurants and bars, and workplaces.
8. The other Australian states and territories have all imposed restrictions and requirements on travellers from Victoria, ranging from partial restrictions confined to areas of concern to prohibiting entry from the entire state of Victoria. Some states and territories have decided to ease their restrictions in light of the improving situation in Victoria. For instance, Queensland have permitted people from regional Victoria to travel to the state. Only residents are permitted to travel from greater Melbourne and must enter managed quarantine for 14 days after arriving in the state. Similar requirements are now in place in the Northern Territories. No state has lifted restrictions for greater Melbourne.
9. Urgent investigations are underway by New South Wales and Queensland to contact trace and determine how the case on Wednesday 9 June 2021 occurred. Various exposure sites have been declared, but no further cases of transmission have been identified to date in either state in addition to the case described in paragraph 3 above.

Proposed New Zealand Measures for Travellers from New South Wales and Queensland

10. As we did when the outbreak first occurred in Victoria, I propose putting in **place public health measures for those travellers whose point of origin is New South Wales or Queensland**. These include the requirement to:
 - i. follow local health advice
 - ii. if travellers have been in locations of interest, to self-isolate
 - iii. if travellers are a close contact, to self-isolate and get tested; and
 - iv. if travellers are already in New Zealand, to self-isolate and get tested.

Health Advice

11. Based on the information available on 10 June 2021, I consider the overall risk to New Zealand to be low. This recommendation may change as further information is available, but at this point I consider that a precautionary approach be taken and **recommend that the pause on QFT from Victoria continue, with a review on Wednesday, 16 June 2021**.
12. Furthermore, I recommend that **New Zealand residents should be allowed to return on a 'green flight' (i.e. one where isolation and quarantine is not required on arrival) from Victoria to New Zealand if they can provide evidence of a negative COVID-19 test, taken within three-days of departure**.
13. I recommend that the range of pre-departure tests (PDT) made available to people in Australia wanting to return to New Zealand be narrowed. Currently, we accept PCR, Antigen and Lamp testing. However, based on the fact that the PCR test remains the gold

standard and recognising others are not widely available, **I recommend that that we only accept a PCR test for travellers wanting to return to New Zealand.**

14. I am also proposing that clear communications be provided to passengers reinforcing:
 - i. the current public health measures in place,
 - ii. the requirement to wear face coverings on the aircraft and at the airport,
 - iii. the requirement to make a health declaration,
 - iv. that passengers may be subject to random temperature checks.
 - v. the importance of downloading the COVID-19 tracer app, and
 - vi. the requirement to self-isolate and be tested immediately if they have any symptoms of illness.
15. These measures, which are additional to the usual QFT measures, should minimise the risk of COVID-19 spreading to New Zealand.
16. A separate risk assessment will be completed relating to the developing situation in Queensland.

Continuation of QFT pause

17. If you agree with a continuation of a pause of QFT from Victoria at this time, no change to the exemption notice will be required to enable this, as the current Notice will remain in place until revoked. However, the other proposed changes to the exemption Notice described below are recommended to come into effect at 11:59pm tomorrow (11 June).

Impact on travellers

18. The consequence of a continued pause will be that QFT from greater Melbourne will continue to be temporarily suspended. If you agree with the preferred option regarding the return of New Zealanders on 'green flights', they will be required to follow the accompanying requirements associated with that option. If a traveller who does not meet these requirements needs to return to New Zealand urgently, they will need to secure a flight and a place in the Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ) system.
19. Further review and advice on the COVID-19 situation in Victoria will be provided on Wednesday 16 June 2021.

Amendment of requirements on air crew

20. I have received advice that the continued extension of the pause – and in particular the requirement for all air crew to have pre-departure tests – is creating some disruption for the air sector. In this context, I am now also recommending that you put in place a more risk-proportionate testing arrangement for air crew. This involves *moving from requiring a pre-departure test within three days of travel, back to requiring seven-day PCR surveillance testing for aircrew flying* between Victoria and New Zealand. This advice is based on the following:
 - i. the majority of air crew are fully vaccinated;
 - ii. PPE and physical distancing for both crew and passengers on planes; and
 - iii. there have been very few instances in the past 16 months where infected crew have infected passengers.

21. In addition, I am proposing to still require that air crew should:
- i. always return a negative test prior to flying QFT flights;
 - ii. not fly if they are a close or casual contact or have been in a location of interest; and
 - iii. not fly if they have symptoms consistent with COVID-19 and should be tested immediately if they have symptoms, even if they have had a recent test.
22. The various measures listed above provide layers of protection which mitigate the risk arising from aircrew to very low – both with regards to becoming infected with COVID-19 and on transmitting any infection onwards. In order to introduce these measures a change is required to the relevant notice. This will come into effect at 11:59pm on 11 June 2021.

Consultation

23. While you do not need to consult the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Transport before making a decision on continuing the pause of QFT, and noting the further recommended options included for your consideration, we have copied those Ministers into this briefing to keep them abreast of current developments.

Recommendations

We recommend you:

- a) **Note** that, as at 10 June 2021, there have been 93 cases associated with the outbreak in Victoria. **Noted**
- b) **Note** that, based on information available on 10 June 2021, I recommend that the pause on QFT from Victoria continue, with a review on Wednesday 16 June 2021. **Noted**
- c) **Note** that there is a Section 70 Notice in place for Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales. **Noted**
- d) **Agree to** New Zealand residents being allowed to return on 'a green flight' with either of the following conditions:
- i. All 'green flight' **passengers and air crew** being required to provide evidence of a negative PCR COVID-19 test, taken within three-days of departure **(not preferred)**; or **Yes/No**
 - ii. **Only passengers** on 'green flights' being required to provide evidence of a negative COVID-19 test, taken within three-days of departure **(preferred option)**; or **Yes/No**
 - iii. There being no requirement, **on either passengers or air crew**, to provide evidence of a negative COVID-19 test **(not preferred)**. **Yes/No**
- e) **Agree** that **only the PCR-test** be accepted, as the gold standard COVID-19 test, for travellers wanting to return to New Zealand **Yes/No**

- f) **Agree** that, instead of pre-departure testing, aircrew on flights between Victoria and New Zealand should be required to undertake routine seven-day PCR surveillance testing. **Yes/No**
- g) **Note** that the changes required to the relevant exemption notice for your signature will come into effect at 11:59pm on 11 June 2021. **Noted**
- h) **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**



Dr Ashley Bloomfield
Director-General of Health
Date: 10 June 2021



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of COVID-19 Response
Date: 10/6/21

PROACTIVELY RELEASED

Trans-Tasman Quarantine-Free Travel (QFT): Health advice on the potential continuation of the pause on QFT from Victoria

Background

24. New Zealand was first notified of a locally acquired case in Victoria on 25 May 2021. Later that day, you were provided advice recommending that QFT from Victoria should be paused. After consulting the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Transport, you agreed that there should be a pause to QFT from Victoria.
25. On 25 May 2021, you decided to pause QFT flights from Victoria for an initial period of three days and a Notice was subsequently issued excluding QFT flights for travellers who had been in Victoria 7:59pm on 25 May 2021 (New Zealand time).
26. On 28 May 2021 you received advice recommending a continuation of the pause of QFT from Victoria for a further seven days, with a review on Thursday, 3 June 2021. On Thursday 3 June, you agreed to continue the pause on QFT for travellers in the greater Melbourne, with a review on Wednesday 9 June 2021.

Latest case information and health assessment

Evolving situation in greater Melbourne

27. Australian Officials have deemed the cases associated with the situation in greater Melbourne comprise four distinct clusters.
28. Three of the four clusters contain 74 cases where the cases are genomically similar and most of the cases are epidemiologically linked. These include:
 - a. the Whittlesea Community cluster (excluding the previous Wollert Community Case),
 - b. the Port Melbourne Workplace cluster, and
 - c. the Arcare Maidstone cluster.

WGS results for these clusters show Kappa (B.1.617.1) variant are genomically similar to the previous Wollert Community Case identified on 11 May 2021.

29. A fourth cluster, associated with a North Melbourne Primary School, is not related to the other three clusters as it involves the Delta (B.1.617.2) variant. As at 9:00am on Wednesday, 9 June 2021 there are 15 cases associated with this cluster. A genomic link has been found between these cases and a returned traveller who entered hotel quarantine in Melbourne on 8 May 2021 and tested positive on arrival.

30. The case left isolation on 23 May 2021. A further epidemiological link is being investigated including reviewing CCTV and incident logs. To date, no reported or obvious breach of infection prevention control protocols or anything else that would indicate a transmission has happened inside the hotel has been identified.

Responses to the Melbourne outbreaks

31. In response to the Melbourne outbreak, the Victorian government instigated a seven-day (New Zealand Alert Level 3-equivalent) lock-down which was due to end at 11:59pm on Thursday, 3 June 2021, applying across the state.
32. On 2 June 2021, Victoria announced that the lockdown in place for Greater Melbourne would be extended for another 7 days, until 11.59pm on 10 June 2021. Lockdown restrictions were eased for regional Victoria as of 11.59pm on 3 June 2021.
33. Victoria announced on 9 June 2021 that lockdown restrictions will ease from 11 June 2021, but with some continuing restrictions in place in greater Melbourne; such as limits on gatherings, restaurants and bars, and workplaces.
34. In making my health assessment, I have also considered a range of information about the outbreak that is relevant to assessing whether the outbreak continues to pose a risk of COVID-19 entering New Zealand.
35. This information notes that as of Thursday 10 June 2021, there are 93 cases associated with the current outbreak of community cases in greater Melbourne comprising multiple clusters. Community cases have been identified with unrelated variants of COVID-19 in circulation, Kappa (B.1.617.1) and Delta (B.1.617.2). These cases, with the exception of one case, are located in the greater Melbourne area.

A new positive Queensland case

36. A further positive case was identified in Queensland on 9 June 2021. A woman who has tested positive for COVID-19, and is presumed infectious since 1 June 2021, drove from Melbourne to the Sunshine Coast through New South Wales with her husband. The couple departed Melbourne during Victoria's full lockdown. She is now isolating with her husband, who has now tested positive, in Queensland.
37. At the time of their departure, Queensland had declared all of Victoria a hotspot meaning only residents were permitted to travel from Victoria to Queensland and were required to enter hotel quarantine in Brisbane for 14 days. New South Wales allows entry into the state but only to get to a person's place of residence and then stay for the duration of the lockdown or pass through in the most direct route. Urgent investigations are under way by the relevant health authorities to contact trace and determine how this incident occurred. Various exposure sites have been identified and no cases of transmission have been identified to date in either state.

Ongoing risk assessment is underway

38. Noting the evolving situation with Queensland and remaining uncertainty with respect to Victoria, we will continue to review the situation daily, based on the most recent information and intelligence from Australian health officials.
39. Further case information, including contact tracing, locations of interest and testing volumes are expected to be updated daily. Any additional locally acquired cases will be notified immediately.

Health advice

40. Based on the information available on 10 June 2021, I consider the overall risk to New Zealand to be low. This recommendation may change as further information is available, but at this point I consider that a precautionary approach be taken and **recommend that the pause on QFT from Victoria continue, with a review on 16 June 2021.**
41. Furthermore, I recommend that, **New Zealand residents should be allowed to return on a 'green flight'** (i.e. one where isolation and quarantine is not required on arrival) **from Victoria to New Zealand if they can provide evidence of a negative COVID-19 test, taken within three-days of departure.**
42. I also recommend that **the range of Pre-departure tests (PDT) that we accept for travellers wanting to return to New Zealand be narrowed.** Currently, we accept PCR, Antigen and Lamp testing. However, based on the fact that the PCR test remains the gold standard and recognising others are not widely available, **I recommend that that we only accept a PCR test for travellers wanting to return to New Zealand.**
43. As we did when the Victoria outbreak first occurred, I propose putting in **place public health measures for those travellers whose point of origin is New South Wales or Queensland.** These include the requirement to:
- i. Follow local health advice
 - ii. If travellers have been in locations of interest, to self-isolate
 - iii. If travellers are a close contact, to self-isolate and get tested; and
 - iv. If travellers are already in New Zealand, to self-isolate and get tested.
44. I am also proposing that **clear communications be provided to passengers** reinforcing:
- i. the current public health measures in place,
 - ii. the requirement to wear face coverings on the aircraft and at the airport,
 - iii. the requirement to make a health declaration,
 - iv. that passengers may be subject to random temperature checks.
 - v. the importance of downloading the COVID tracer app, and
 - vi. the requirement to self-isolate and be tested immediately if they have any symptoms of illness.
45. These measures, in addition to the usual QFT measures, should minimise the risk of COVID-19 spreading to New Zealand.
46. A separate risk assessment will be completed relating to the developing situation in Queensland.

New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990

47. The exemption discretion must be exercised consistently with the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (NZBORA).
48. New Zealand citizens have the right to enter New Zealand. A continuation of a pause in QFT flights would limit the realisation of that right by citizens currently offshore in Victoria.

49. The greatest threat to the health of people in New Zealand continues to be from the introduction of COVID-19 cases at the border. That risk continues to be present with the emergence of new Covid-19 variants. The continuation of the pause in QFT flights from Victoria will further this important objective of preventing the introduction of COVID-19 to New Zealand, pending further clarification of the risk this outbreak poses to people in New Zealand.
50. It is also the case that not all New Zealanders in Victoria will have their right to re-enter New Zealand restricted. The existence of "Green" flights from Victoria will allow some New Zealanders to enter the country, while requiring some stricter measures than fully quarantine-free travel. This is less restrictive of rights than a full pause.
51. The discretion to grant or rescind exemptions should be viewed in light of the restrictions imposed on other arrivals to New Zealand under the Air Border Order and Isolation and Quarantine Order. If the exemption power is not exercised in line with the purpose of the Act this could have the effect of making managed isolation restrictions on others appear arbitrary and not proportionate to the public health risk.
52. When assessing the proportionality of a pause it is also relevant to note that the Government has been transparent with advice to the public that for the purposes of QFT, New Zealand citizens departing the country do so at their own risk. Bearing in mind the advice that New Zealanders going to Australia should be prepared for the possibility of a pause, being required to shelter in place for a brief period should not cause significant hardship, especially given the social rights enjoyed by New Zealand citizens in Australia (e.g. reciprocal health care).

Equity

53. Preventing the introduction and spread of COVID-19 in New Zealand will protect vulnerable New Zealanders, including Māori and Pacific communities who have been historically disproportionately impacted by a widespread epidemic.
54. There will be social and economic impacts from the continued pause of QFT flights from Victoria but this is expected to be limited compared to an introduction of COVID-19 into New Zealand and the potential for increased Alert Levels and the resulting economic and social costs.
55. However, the options provided in my recommendation provide opportunities for most New Zealand citizens, residents and visa holders who have been in Victoria on or after 7:59pm on 25 May 2021 (New Zealand time) to return to New Zealand via 'green flights' and subject to the conditions stipulated.

Next steps

56. Further review and advice on the situation in Victoria, including any developments in Queensland, will be provided on Wednesday, 16 June 2021.

ENDS.