

Briefing

Quarantine-free travel (QFT): Health advice on pause of QFT from New South Wales

Date due to MO: 23 June 2021 **Action required by:** 23 June 2021

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Health Report number:** 20211435

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	Te Tumu Whakarae mō te Hauora Director-General of Health	s 9(2)(a)
Sue Gordon	Deputy Chief Executive COVID-19 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 Withdrawn | |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:

Quarantine-free travel (QFT): Health advice on pause of QFT from New South Wales

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Date:** 23 June 2021

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

Purpose of report

1. This report provides in writing my verbal advice, provided yesterday, to pause quarantine-free travel (QFT) from New South Wales (NSW) to New Zealand from 11:59pm New Zealand Standard Time (NZST) on Tuesday 22 June 2021.

Summary

Current known cases and their source

2. As of 3:30pm NZST, Tuesday 22 June 2021, we are aware of a total of 21 community cases of COVID-19 in NSW all clustered in the same area. Of these 21 cases, there are currently two where no direct source of infection is known. One is a woman who works at a nail salon at Bondi junction. NSW authorities are most concerned about a 9-year-old student who attends school close to Bondi junction but has no history of being there (so it is unclear how they contracted COVID-19). Both were tested as they were symptomatic. The father of the child was also tested at the same time but returned a negative result.
3. As of 3:30pm NZST, Tuesday 22 June 2021, there were a total of 103 public locations of interest identified on the New South Wales Health website. They are spread throughout Sydney's Eastern, South and Inner West suburbs, including Bondi Junction which is a popular tourist area. Also, the north western suburbs, and the areas of Wollongong and Shell Harbour outside of Sydney. It is likely that more exposure events will be identified though how wide the spread will become is yet to be determined.
4. NSW is currently requiring close contacts who have been to any location of interest to self-isolate for 14 days and get tested. Face covering rules are in place for public transport in Sydney, the Blue Mountains, Wollongong and Shellharbour and indoors in some local government areas, limits of 100 visitors in homes (without a COVID-19 Safety Plan) and 200 people for outdoor public gatherings.
5. The situation in NSW is still evolving and may change as further information become available. While there is no suggestion of widespread transmission yet, further testing will be required to have be certain that there is no further spread. NSW authorities were estimating around 30,000 tests would be completed on 22 June 2021 and around 25,000 tests are being completed daily on average. However, the cases without a clear link to an existing source are concerning.

6. Based on the evidence and information available, and **taking a precautionary approach, my advice (as communicated to you verbally on 22 June 2021) confirms your decision that QFT from NSW be paused from 11.59pm on 22 June 2021.**
7. I note that the pause allows aircrew to continue to operate in the same manner as when QFT was paused with Victoria, with crew being subject to seven-day surveillance testing but otherwise being allowed to fly in and out of NSW. This decision was made yesterday following advice from the Office of the Director of Public Health; that the risk of this exemption for aircrew was low. I am comfortable with this decision, noting that if air crew are at a location or interest, or a contact of a case, they are not permitted to continue their duties. Also, travel to and from Norfolk Island will not be affected.
8. I propose to review the pause with NSW in 3 days, including any additional public health measures that might support the recommencement of QFT travel with NSW. You will also receive further advice on the case that flew to Wellington on the weekend of 19 June 2021.

Recommendations

We recommend you:

- a) **Note** my view that the situation in New South Wales is still evolving and may change as further information become available and results of testing become known. **Noted**
- b) **Note** based on the information available, and taking a precautionary approach, my advice (as communicated to you verbally on 22 June 2021) confirms your decision that quarantine-free travel from New South Wales be paused from 11.59pm on 22 June 2021. **Noted**
- c) **Note** that the pause allows aircrew to continue to operate in the same manner as when quarantine-free travel was paused with Victoria, with crew allowed to fly between New Zealand and New South Wales, but being subject to seven-day surveillance testing. **Noted**
- d) **Note** that I will provide you with further advice on the pause, and any public health controls that might support recommencement of quarantine-free travel arrangements between New South Wales and New Zealand. **Noted**
- e) **Agree** to forward this advice to the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, Yes/ No the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Transport.



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



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

Date: 23/06/2021

Date: 23/6/2021

Quarantine-free travel (QFT): Health advice on pause 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. In the event of case(s) of COVID-19 in the community, decisions on continuation, pauses or suspension are also considered independently.
2. 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 objectives of:
 - a. keeping COVID-19 out of New Zealand
 - b. keeping QFT open and operating if safe, and
 - c. minimising the impact of any disruption to travellers and operators.
3. New Zealand became aware of a locally acquired community case in New South Wales, in Sydney's eastern suburbs at 4:00pm on Wednesday 16 June 2021. Whole genomic sequencing (WGS) was completed on 17 June 2021 and results for the index case identified the B.1.617.1 Delta variant (a variant of high concern).
4. An identical sequence to Case 1 has been recorded in the United States of America. Flight crew are being considered the most likely source of infection at this stage, though Case 1 is understood to have only transported one crew during his infectious period and they returned negative tests while in Australia. Other than his wife, close contacts of Case 1, including family members and co-workers, have returned negative test results.

Current situation in New South Wales

Current known cases and their source

5. As of 3:30pm New Zealand Standard Time (NZST), Tuesday 22 June 2021, we are aware of a total of 21 cases all clustered in the same area. Of these 21 cases, there are currently two where no direct source of infection known.
6. Seven new cases were reported overnight, with five of these cases being close contacts who were in isolation during their infectious period. Two cases were not in isolation. One is a woman who works at a nail salon at Bondi Junction, who worked one day during her infectious period and attended a party for approximately six hours.
7. NSW authorities are concerned about a 9-year-old student who attends school close to Bondi Junction but has no history of being there. He was tested as he was symptomatic. His father was also tested but returned a negative result.

Locations of interest

8. As at 4:30pm on 18 June there were a total of 26 public locations of interest identified on the New South Wales Health website. They are spread throughout Sydney's Eastern, South

and Inner West suburbs, including Bondi Junction which is a popular tourist area. Also, the north western suburbs, and the areas of Wollongong and Shell Harbour outside of Sydney. It is likely that more exposure events will be identified

Additional public health measures required by New South Wales

9. NSW is currently requiring close contacts who have been to any location of interest to self-isolate for 14 days and get tested. There are face covering rules in place for public transport in Sydney, the Blue Mountains, Wollongong and Shell Harbour and indoors in some local government areas, limits of 100 visitors in homes (without a COVID-19 Safety Plan) and 200 people for outdoor public gatherings.

My public health advice

10. It is my view that the situation in NSW is still evolving and may change as further information becomes available. There are now 21 confirmed cases, with two cases where no direct source of infection is known. The locations of interest have also increased.
11. While there is no suggestion of widespread transmission as yet, it is my view that further testing is required to have certainty that this is the case. Based on the evidence and information available, and **taking a precautionary approach, my advice (as communicated to you verbally on 22 June 2021) confirms your decision that QFT from NSW be paused from 11.59pm on 22 June 2021.**
12. Approximately 25,000 tests are occurring each day. Overnight 22,000 tests were undertaken with authorities estimating 30,000 tests being completed on 22 June 2021. I note that there have also been no further unexplained wastewater detections.
13. The pause allows aircrew to continue to operate in the same manner as when QFT was paused with Victoria, with crew being subject to seven-day surveillance testing. I am comfortable that this approach noting that if crew were at a location of interest, or a close or casual contact of a case they would not be able to continue their duties.
14. I will provide you with further advice on the pause, and any public health controls that might support the recommencement of QFT travel from NSW. This will include advice on whether pre-departure testing may be an appropriate control that could support travel recommencing.

Statutory power to grant an exemption and lift the pause

15. You may impose conditions and make exemptions for persons or classes of person under the COVID-19 Public Health (Air Border) Order 2020 or the COVID-19 Public Health (Isolation and Quarantine) Order 2020 (the Orders) if you are satisfied that:
 - a. it is necessary and desirable in order to promote the purposes of the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 (the Act) or the Orders
 - b. the extent of the exemption is not broader than is reasonably necessary to address the matters giving rise to the exemption.
16. When deciding whether to modify or grant an exemption, and what (if any) conditions to impose, you must consider my advice on the public health implications. You must also consult the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and

Minister of Transport [CAB-21-MIN-0101 and clause 26(3A)(a), Air Border Order]. You may also consult other relevant ministers.

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

17. The NSW travel pause promotes the purposes of the Act and the Air Border Order as it will reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission to New Zealand. It will provide officials with the time to gather further information and further consider proportionate public health measures in response.

Health advice

18. My advice on the pause is set out in detail in this report. You are also receiving ongoing advice about the risks associated with COVID-19. In accordance with section 9(2) of the Act, you may have regard to that regular advice without it being repeated here.
19. I confirm the decision to allow aircrew to continue to operate in and out of NSW in the same manner they did when quarantine-free travel was paused with Victoria. This involves air crew being allowed to fly between New Zealand and NSW but being subject to seven-day surveillance testing. My advice is that the level of public health risk associated with granting this exemption for air crew operating in and out of NSW is low.

New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990

20. Your powers under the Act and the Orders must be exercised consistently with the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (NZBORA). In undertaking our NZBORA assessment, we have considered what the Act, the Orders, and the amendment to the Notice are trying to achieve. They are all part of a legal framework for managing the public health risks posed by COVID-19. They support the Government's Elimination Strategy and have the purpose of preventing COVID-19 reaching and being transmitted in our community.
21. We have also considered the affected individual or individuals, being NZ citizens and those ordinarily resident in NZ who are unable to return to NZ. The Act, the Orders and the Notice seek to reduce the risk that a person travelling to New Zealand has, and will transmit, COVID-19. The controls we recommend are imposed on people seeking to undertake QFT travel have a public health focus. We are recommending them to keep New Zealand and all people here safe and well through preventing illness and fatalities.
22. New Zealand citizens have the right to enter New Zealand. A pause in QFT travel will limit the realisation of that right by citizens currently offshore in NSW. It will also impose testing obligations on aircrew. In all cases, we have considered if the impact on the affected individual or individuals could be lessened through fewer or alternative controls.
23. The controls on travellers are justified as COVID-19 is a highly contagious and unpredictable virus that has the potential for asymptomatic transmission. For this reason, a cautious public health approach is considered proportionate to the risk. At this time, the pause is a temporary measure which will provide officials with the time to gather further information and further consider proportionate public health measures in response.
24. Relevant to the assessment of proportionality is the fact 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 that advice, New Zealanders going to Australia should have been aware of and prepared for the possibility of a pause,

and 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 (such as the right to reside and reciprocal health care).

Equity

25. The pause of QFT will disrupt travel and prevent New Zealand citizens, residents and visa holders who have been in NSW on or after 11:59pm NZST on Tuesday 22 June 2021 from returning to New Zealand in the short-term.
26. 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.

Exemption Notice

27. The Notice that came into effect at 11:59pm NZST on Tuesday 22 June 2021 pauses QFT travel with NSW for travellers who have been in NSW on or after 11:59pm on NZST Tuesday 22 June 2021, except for aircrew. Aircrew will be subject to an ongoing seven-day surveillance testing regime. If they return to New Zealand with COVID-19-like symptoms they will be assessed by a Medical Officer of Health and appropriate risk mitigation steps taken. Also, travel to and from Norfolk Island will not be affected.
28. The consequence of a pause will be that affected travellers will be required to shelter in place for the duration of the pause. If a traveller needs to return to New Zealand urgently, they will need to secure a flight and a place in MIQ.

Next steps

29. Agencies, through the National Leadership Response Team (NLRT) and the Response Framework will continue work to operationalise the pause. It will continue to be communicated in agreement with your office, with updates provided on the relevant websites.
30. We will continue to update on the situation in Australia, and NSW in particular, to enable future decisions, including about whether to lift the current pause. You will also receive further advice on the case that flew to Wellington on the weekend of 19 June 2021.

ENDS.

PROACTIVELY RELEASED