

Briefing

Health advice on a review of quarantine-free travel from South Australia, Queensland and with Australia generally

Date due to MO:	20 July 2021	Action required by:	20 July 2021
Security level:	IN CONFIDENCE	Health Report number:	20211669
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
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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 Withdrawn | |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:

Health advice on a review of quarantine-free travel from South Australia and Queensland and with Australia generally

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Date:** 20 July 2021

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

Purpose of report

1. This report provides my advice on a review of quarantine-free travel (QFT) from South Australia and Queensland to New Zealand following the notification of locally-acquired cases of COVID-19 in those states.

Summary

2. On Monday 19 July 2021, the Ministry of Health (the Ministry) was notified of three new locally-acquired cases of COVID-19 in South Australia linked to the current New South Wales (NSW) outbreak. A public health risk assessment determined that QFT could continue at that time.
3. At 1pm on Tuesday 20 July 2021 (New Zealand Standard Time (NZST)), the Ministry was notified of two further locally-acquired cases of COVID-19 in South Australia. A public health risk assessment has now advised that, consistent with the lockdown announced for South Australia, QFT between South Australia and New Zealand should be paused. Health authorities have confirmed the cases are the Delta variant linked to the current NSW outbreak.
4. While all five cases can be linked, there has been a significant exposure event at a restaurant, with 130 people, attended by a highly infectious case. There are also a growing number of locations of interest, including shopping centres, restaurants, pubs, and service stations. One of the cases involved also travelled, using several different modes of transport, from central to northern Queensland.
5. The extent of COVID-19 transmission in South Australia remains unclear. Whole genome sequencing (WGS) has not yet been completed for the positive cases that have been identified, and there are many testing results for contacts still outstanding.
6. The Ministry has been monitoring the situation closely in South Australia and across various other states and territories in recent days. This was due to a growing number of locations of interest across Australia, and a range of concerning COVID-19 situations across NSW, Victoria, and Queensland.

Recommendations

We recommend you:

- a) **Note** that between 19-20 July 2021, 5 positive cases of the Delta variant have emerged in South Australia and the state has since entered a seven-day lockdown. **Noted**
- b) **Agree** that as a precautionary measure, quarantine-free travel from South Australia to New Zealand be paused from 11:59pm on Tuesday 20 July 2021 (New Zealand Standard Time). **Yes/No**
- c) **Agree** that New Zealand citizens and residents currently in South Australia can return to New Zealand on managed return flights, following receipt of a negative pre-departure test 72 hours prior to their departure. **Yes/No**
- d) **Note** that a review of the pause and further public health risk assessment for South Australia will be completed on 27 July 2021, or earlier if the situation changes significantly. **Noted**
- e) **Agree** that anyone in South Australia on or after 11:59pm on Tuesday 20 July 2021 (New Zealand Standard Time) is prohibited from travelling on a quarantine-free travel flight that departs for New Zealand. **Yes/No**
- f) **Agree** that while I am not proposing a specific pause in quarantine-free travel between Queensland to New Zealand, the Ministry of Health will continue to monitor the situation there. **Yes/No**
- g) **Note** my advice that consideration be given to discouraging travel to Australia and looking towards a full suspension with Australia. If suspension is implemented, this should be a managed process with a lead in time of at least one week. **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**
- i) **Note** that the Parliamentary Counsel Office will prepare the required amendments to the COVID-19 Public Health Response (Exemptions and Conditions for Quarantine-free Travel) Notice 2021 for your signature. **Noted**



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

Date: 20 July 2021



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

Date: 20/7/21

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Public health advice

South Australia

7. As at 3pm on Tuesday 20 July 2021 (NZST), there were five locally-acquired cases and 23 locations of interest in South Australia. To date, all have been linked epidemiologically. Health authorities have confirmed the cases are the Delta variant linked to the current NSW outbreak. However, the precise origins of the South Australian cases have yet to be confirmed.
8. Based on the information available at 4:15pm on Tuesday 20 July 2021 (NZST), I **recommend that QFT from South Australia be paused for seven days from 11:59pm on Tuesday 20 July 2021 (NZST), with a review on 27 July 2021.**
9. The situation in South Australia is evolving. The decision by South Australia authorities to enter lockdown for seven days should mitigate further risk of locally acquired cases and will stop people travelling. However, the decision does also suggest that a pause of QFT with South Australia is warranted in the interim as we gather more information about a rapidly evolving situation there. My assessment may change as more information is available.
10. I note that South Australian authorities have also expressed concerns about the impact of a significant exposure event at a restaurant attended by a highly infectious case. There are also resultant contacts and locations of interest, including shopping centres, restaurants, and pubs.
11. While the five cases have been linked epidemiologically, we are still lacking WGS data that can link all positive cases genomically. A pause will allow further evidence to be assessed and evaluated, including more testing results.
12. My recommendation is that, while we put a pause in place as a precautionary interim measure, we also allow New Zealand citizens and residents to return as long as they have a negative 72-hour pre-departure test (PDT) result and meet the usual QFT travel conditions (including, not having been at a COVID-19 exposure event). Given that we do not yet have evidence of widespread COVID-19 transmission in South Australia, I am **not** recommending that travellers on managed return flights be required to isolate on return.

Queensland

13. As at 3pm on Tuesday 20 July 2021 (NZST), in Queensland one new locally-acquired case was notified. The person was a known contact of a previous case. Restrictions have been in place since Queensland's early July 2021 snap lockdown. Queensland's restrictions are similar to New Zealand's Alert Level 2 settings, including a requirement for face coverings in various public settings. We consider this case to be low risk presently.

14. Based on the information available at 4:15pm on Tuesday 20 July 2021(NZST), **I am not recommending a specific pause of QFT between Queensland and New Zealand. However, the Ministry will continue to monitor the situation in Queensland.**
15. To mitigate any immediate risk, the existing section 70 notice issued under the Health Act 1956 for Queensland will continue to be updated as new locations of interest are identified. This notice requires all those who have been in a location of interest in Queensland and are now in New Zealand, to isolate and submit themselves for medical testing.

Australia generally

16. I note that overall the situation in Australia remains uncertain, with NSW, Victoria and South Australia all now in lockdowns. Furthermore, the Ministry of Health's Country Risk Assessment Tool has identified that Australia now has 2.2 cases per 100,000 across the whole population. This moves Australia from being in the 'low risk' country category into the 'high risk' one. Furthermore, I note a consistent pattern of frequent lockdowns in individual states or territories since QFT with Australia began.
17. Several controls are in place to mitigate the immediate risk posed by travellers from Australia to New Zealand, including:
 - a. requiring a negative Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) COVID-19 PDT be undertaken within 72-hours of travel
 - b. completion of all baseline pre-departure questions for contact tracing purposes
 - c. a prohibition on people travelling from Australia if they have been at any locations of interest in the past 14-days, even if they have evidence of a negative PDT
 - d. a prohibition on people travelling to New Zealand if they have been in a state or territory from which the New Zealand Government does not currently allow QFT
 - e. a section 70 notice issued under the Health Act 1956 requiring the testing and isolation of persons in New Zealand who have been at any locations of interest.
18. At this stage, I am concerned enough about the situation in Australia that I am recommending that **consideration should be given to discouraging travel to Australia and looking towards a full suspension with Australia. If suspension is implemented, this should be a managed process with a lead in time of at least one week.**

Latest South Australia case overview

19. As at 3pm on Tuesday 20 July 2021 (NZST), there were five locally acquired cases linked to one cluster and 23 locations of interest in South Australia. The cases are:
 - a. a man in his 80s (the likely index case) who returned from Argentina and completed hotel quarantine in NSW before his return to South Australia - there is a possibility that infection occurred in transit to the airport as the man completed three negative tests in a 14-day period prior
 - b. two close contacts who have tested positive late on the afternoon of 19 July 2021- a man and a woman both in their 50s
 - c. another case is a family member of another positive case, who was initially a close contact and already in isolation.

20. The fifth case, a man in his 60s, is causing the most concern for health authorities. He attended a 'celebratory function', possibly a birthday party in a private function room with another case at an Adelaide restaurant on Saturday 17 July 2021.
21. The area was not well ventilated and there may have a significant number of people in an enclosed environment which could easily spread the virus. Health authorities in South Australia have stated that this may have been a super-spreader event.
22. There have been multiple positive wastewater testing results in South Australia, with a catchment of 100,000 people over July 15 and 16 July 2021. Initially it was assumed it came from local isolation facilities, but that positive result could be possibly due to COVID-19 cases not in isolation facilities.
23. There is not yet evidence of widespread community transmission beyond the five cases, but there are many outstanding test results and whole genome sequencing for the cases has not yet been completed.

Potential source of infection

24. To date, the five cases have been linked epidemiologically, and there is known link back to the NSW outbreak, although the precise source has not yet been confirmed. There are not yet any unexplained cases.
25. There is no evidence yet of widespread community transmission. However, we are waiting for WGS data. We are also awaiting the results of a high number of test results from close and casual contacts.

Locations of interest

26. As at 3:00pm on 20 July 2021 (NZST), South Australian authorities have identified 23 locations of interest. These locations include shopping centres, restaurants, pubs, and service stations.

Contact tracing

27. There are approximately 3,000 people now completing home quarantine in South Australia, including people who had visited Victoria exposure sites.

Testing results

28. We do not yet have adequate information about the testing results primary and secondary contacts. The table below outlines current COVID-19 testing rates reported to the Australian Department of Health at 12:00pm on 19 July 2021.

Past 24 hours to 12: 00pm 19 July 2021	Australia (TOTAL)	South Australia	Queensland
Tests	126,678	7,164	7,393
Last 7 Days			
Tests	742,027	58,472	83,774
Rate per 100,000 population	2,926	3,337	1,645
Percent testing positivity	<0.1%	<0.1%	<0.1%
Cumulative total			
Total tests	22,275,925	1,713,542	3,189,604
Percent testing positivity	0.1%	0.0%	0.1%

29. Overall, testing rates in South Australia have been steady, but not yet at an acceptable testing rate of population (0.1%). In the last 24 hours approximately 7,000 tests were processed and approximately 80,000 tests processed in the last seven days.

Extra public health measures required by South Australia

30. On Monday 19 July, South Australian authorities announced a suite of new restrictions, including limiting gathering sizes, required face coverings in all indoor public areas, closed all non-essential retail outlets, gyms and limited sporting activities.
31. In response to poor compliance with these restrictions, on Tuesday 20 July 2021 South Australia announced a snap lockdown for seven days from 6:00pm. There are now only five reasons people can leave home:
- a. care and compassion reasons, such as caring for a loved one
 - b. essential work
 - c. purchase of essential goods, such as a food
 - d. medical reasons, including vaccination and testing
 - e. exercise, but it must be limited to people from the same household.
32. South Australia's borders remain closed to Victoria, NSW and the Australian Capital Territory.

Responses from other jurisdictions

33. At this time, arrivals to Western Australia from South Australia or who have travelled through South Australia since 8 July 2021 must self-quarantine for 14 days and have a COVID-19 test within 48 hours of arrival and again on day 12.

Latest Queensland case overview

34. As at 3:00pm on Tuesday 20 July 2021, one new locally acquired case was notified. This person is a known contact of an existing case. This new case had received both doses of the Pfizer vaccination.
35. Their exposure event was on 10 July 2021 and following a negative test result on 15 July 2021 they left MIQ. Subsequently, they attended a dinner with 130 contacts, visited bars, and travelled to Northern Queensland using multiple different modes of transport, including Virgin Airlines.
36. The case developed symptoms on 17 July 2021 and returned to MIQ, testing positive on 18 July 2021. Contact tracing is underway.
37. Restrictions have been in place in Queensland since early July 2021. Queensland's restrictions are similar to New Zealand's Alert Level 2 settings, including a requirement for face coverings in various public settings.
38. We consider this case to be low risk at present.

Consultation requirement

39. I note that you have consulted with the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Minister of Transport before any decision on pausing QFT. Other relevant Ministers may also be consulted [CAB-21-MIN-0101].

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

40. The proposed pause of QFT from South Australia will promote the purposes of both the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 (the Act) and the Air Border Order.
41. The pause will make travellers from that area subject to the requirements of the Air Border Order, including isolation and quarantine on arrival and a confirmed allocation to enter MIQ. The pause is aimed at preventing and limiting the risk of an outbreak or spread of COVID-19 and it is proportionate as it is limited to travellers from an area of higher risk, namely South Australia.
42. There will be social and economic impacts from a pause of QFT, but this is expected to be limited compared to an introduction of COVID-19 in New Zealand and the potential for increased Alert Levels and the resulting economic and social costs.

New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990

43. The exemption discretion must be exercised consistently with the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (NZBORA).
44. The greatest threat to the health of people in New Zealanders 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. A pause in QFT from South Australia would further this important objective of preventing the introduction of COVID-19 to New Zealand, pending clarification of the risk this outbreak poses to people in New Zealand.
45. New Zealand citizens have the right to enter New Zealand. A pause in QFT would limit the realisation of that right by citizens currently offshore in South Australia (citizens forced to remain in Australia will have their right to enter New Zealand limited for the duration of the pause).
46. Any limit on the right of New Zealanders to enter the country must only extend as far as necessary and be proportionate in the circumstances. A decision to rescind the exemption in relation to South Australia is likely to be a proportionate response, given that there is further information that officials need to gather in order to determine the extent of any potential community transmission; and that any pause in QFT is likely to be a temporary measure to allow officials time to gather that information and consider proportionate public health measures in response.
47. The discretion to grant or rescind exemptions should be viewed considering the totality of other 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.
48. 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

49. A pause of QFT with South Australia or any other State or Territory will disrupt travel and prevent New Zealand citizens, residents and visa holders from returning to New Zealand in the short-term.
50. 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

51. If you agree to the recommendations in this report, you will need to sign a revision to the COVID-19 Public Health response (Exemption for Quarantine-free Travel) Notice 2021. The Notice will be in force until superseded or modified.
52. The consequence of a pause generally is that QFT with all affected States or Territories travellers are required to shelter in place for the duration of the pause. However, if the recommendations in this report are agreed, New Zealand citizens and residents will be able to return on 'managed return' flights, without being required to enter into managed isolation and quarantine.

Next steps

53. Agencies, through the National Leadership Response Team (NLRT) and the Response Framework will operationalise the pause.
54. The situation in Australia will continue to be monitored by the Ministry and advice on QFT will be provided if the situation changes. Further advice on QFT between South Australia and New Zealand will be provided on 27 July 2021.
55. The Ministry of Health will continue to work closely with Australian counterparts to collect further information on the outbreak. This will be assessed and evaluated to minimise the risk of COVID-19 spreading to New Zealand.

ENDS.