

Briefing

Readiness assessment for the commencement of quarantine-free travel to the Cook Islands

Date due to MO: 22 November 2020 **Action required by:** 26 November 2020

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Health Report number:** 20202088

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

Contact for telephone discussion

Name	Position	Telephone
Dr Ashley Bloomfield	Director-General of Health	s 9(2)(a)
Maree Roberts	Deputy Director-General, System Strategy and Policy	

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 Withdrawn | |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:

Readiness assessment for the commencement of quarantine-free travel to the Cook Islands

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Date:** 21 November 2020

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

Purpose of report

1. This report provides advice to inform Cabinet's decision on the establishment of quarantine-free travel between New Zealand and the Cook Islands following Cabinet decisions to take steps to establish safe travel arrangements with the Cook Islands and Niue.

Summary

2. An Arrangement to facilitate quarantine-free travel with the Cook Islands has been agreed at officials' level.
3. Cabinet has agreed that quarantine-free travel should only commence when New Zealand and the Cook Islands are in strong COVID-19 situations, including that both sides:
 - a. have met a set of health criteria, including that the spread of cases has been controlled and there have been no locally acquired cases of unknown source for the preceding 28 days, and
 - b. have in place a combination of robust surveillance and testing, robust case and contact management, and robust border control measures.
4. New Zealand officials from Health, Customs, and Immigration conducted a joint readiness and assurance visit to the Cook Islands and have provided their assessment through a joint agency report, against the health and border criteria specified in the annexes to the Arrangement.
5. The joint report indicates that the Cook Islands demonstrates technical readiness in relation to its air and maritime border and agencies on the ground have established standard operating procedures. However, while much work has been done to ready the health system for quarantine-free travel in a global pandemic, an arrangement could not yet be operationalised safely, without further support being provided.
6. It is proposed that the Ministry continue to work with Te Marae Ora (the Cook Island's Ministry of Health) to provide further support to the Cook Islands to complete pandemic planning, establish PCR testing facilities and support training of laboratory technicians. Assistance can also be provided to develop a testing and surveillance plan and assist the scaling up of contact tracing capability to meet anticipated visitor numbers.

7. The Ministry proposes that in mid-February 2021 there is a review of the readiness work towards quarantine-free travel, based on the deliverables of a revised workplan of support to the Cook Islands. As the Cook Islands Health System improves operational readiness, it would be important to take a graduated approach increasing visitor numbers to test newly implemented systems and processes, and ensure the enhanced capabilities are not immediately stretched.
8. From the New Zealand side, there are significant policy decisions to be made regarding the handling of suspension of a quarantine-free travel arrangement with the Cook Islands, with significant operational implications across agencies and for commercial partners.

PROACTIVELY RELEASED

Recommendations

I recommend you:

- a) **Note** Cabinet has agreed that quarantine-free travel should only commence when New Zealand and the Cook Islands are in strong COVID-19 situations, including that both sides:
- a. have met a set of health criteria, including that the spread of cases has been controlled and there have been no locally acquired cases of unknown source for the preceding 28 days, and
 - b. have in place a combination of robust surveillance and testing, robust case and contact management, and robust border control measures.
- b) **Note** a delegation from New Zealand has conducted an assurance and readiness assessment of the Cooks Islands, air border, maritime border and health system arrangements in preparation for commencing quarantine-free travel between the two countries
- c) **Note** the joint report indicates that the Cook Islands demonstrates technical readiness in relation to its aviation and maritime border but while much work has been done to ready the health system for quarantine-free travel, an arrangement could not yet be operationalised safely, without further support being provided
- d) **Note** the very low risk of transmission of COVID-19 from the Cook Islands to New Zealand, and that one-way quarantine free travel would be safe to commence
- e) **Agree** both New Zealand and the Cook Islands should undertake further preparedness work before considering commencing two-way quarantine-free travel by the end of the first quarter of 2021 Yes/No
- f) **Agree** to forward this advice to the Prime Minister Yes/No



Dr Ashley Bloomfield
Director-General of Health
Date: 22 November 2020



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response
Date: 28/11/2020

Readiness assessment for the commencement of quarantine-free travel to the Cook Islands

Background

9. In August 2020 Cabinet tasked officials to undertake the necessary technical assessments and readiness work to commence quarantine-free travel between New Zealand and the Cook Islands, and New Zealand and Niue [CAB-20-MIN-0391].
10. Officials have concluded negotiations on an 'Arrangement to Facilitate Quarantine-Free Travel between New Zealand and the Cook Islands' and an 'Arrangement to Facilitate Quarantine-Free Travel between New Zealand and Niue'. These arrangements provide the framework that needs to be in place to allow travel to commence without the need to quarantine on arrival.
11. Healthcare for the current resident population is provided through a network of health sites including a hospital, eight district clinics throughout the main island and basic health facilities on the outer islands.
12. There are approximately 30 physicians in the Cook Islands, including one anaesthetist and a registrar. There are approximately 45 nurses in the hospital system, with further support from community nurses, but only eight nurses trained to offer care to critically unwell patients.
13. New Zealand supports the Cook Islands health system to:
 - a. develop capability and prepare for emergencies such as natural disasters and pandemics by providing training and guidance
 - b. respond to emergencies; medical assistance teams can be deployed upon request where appropriate.
14. The Cook Islands is very likely to request assistance from New Zealand in the event it is impacted by a COVID-19 incursion and our constitutional links with and commitments to Cook Islands mean we are obliged to respond positively should it be affected by an outbreak.

Officials have conducted an assurance and readiness assessment in the Cook Islands

15. A delegation has visited the Cook Islands to support the health system's pandemic planning and border readiness for quarantine free travel and conduct an assurance and readiness assessment to determine if quarantine-free travel between the two nations can safely commence.
16. The delegation included officials from the Ministry of Health, including a public health physician, Immigration New Zealand and Customs.
17. The New Zealand High Commission provided assistance in-country.

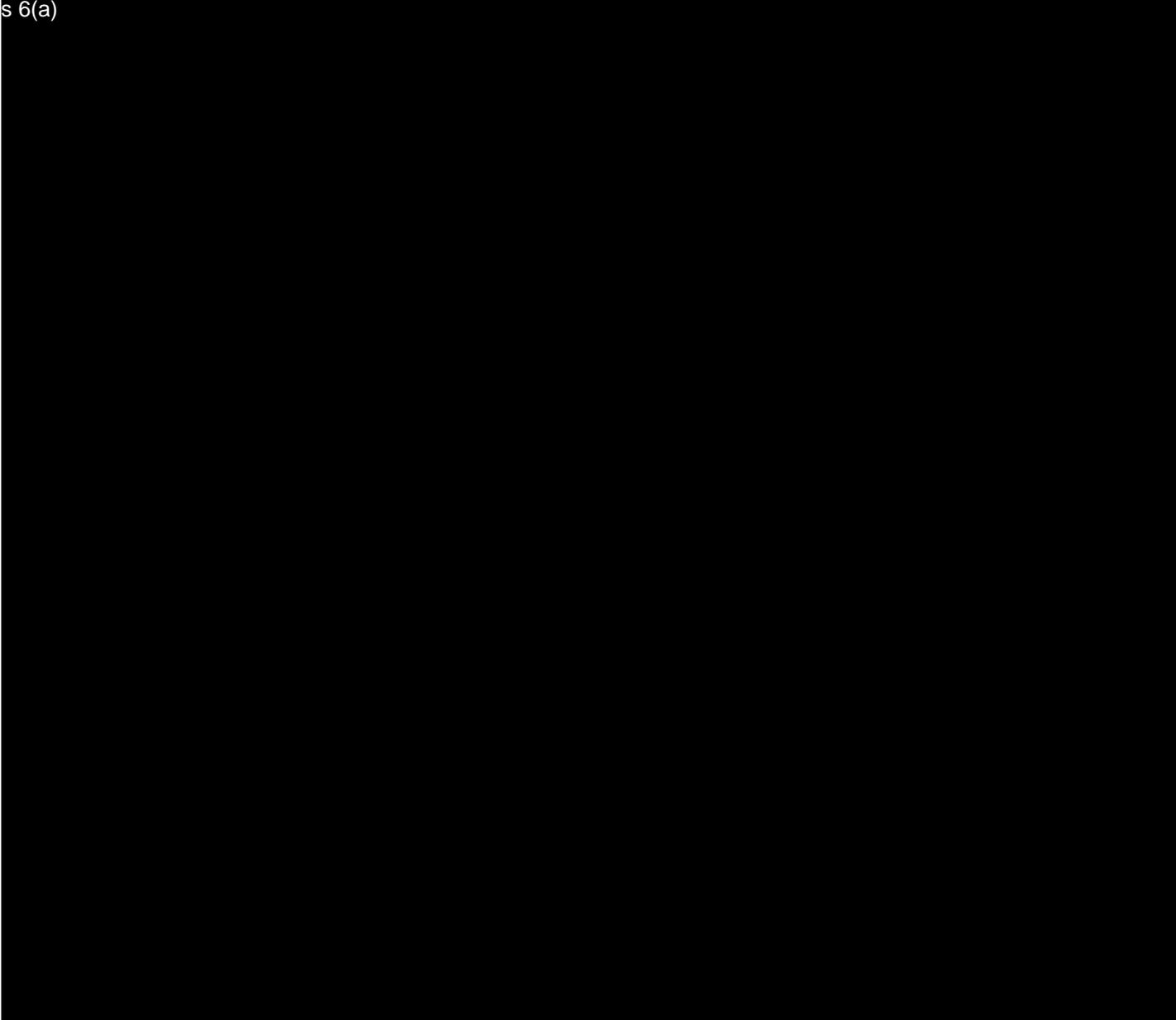
18. Officials were mandated with observing operations to understand the processes and procedures in place and assess them against criteria agreed in the Arrangement framework. The report from the delegation is attached as Appendix 1.
19. Under the terms of the Arrangement, quarantine-free travel will only commence when New Zealand and the Cook Islands are in strong COVID-19 situations. Both sides need to meet a set of health criteria, including that the spread of cases has been controlled and there have been no locally acquired cases of unknown source for the preceding 28 days. Both sides also need to have in place a combination of robust surveillance and testing, robust case and contact management, and robust border control measures.
20. The visit has provided confidence that both air and maritime border controls are suitable and effective with no travel to the outer islands to be permitted. However, there will always be a low risk of COVID-19 positive cases transmitting between the two countries:
 - a. in the Cook Islands through border workers (who are routinely tested) or close contacts of a case from New Zealand travelling while asymptomatic
 - b. in New Zealand if testing and surveillance in the Cook Islands is insufficient to detect asymptomatic cases returning to New Zealand.
21. The visit has also highlighted some important areas for further development in the health system.

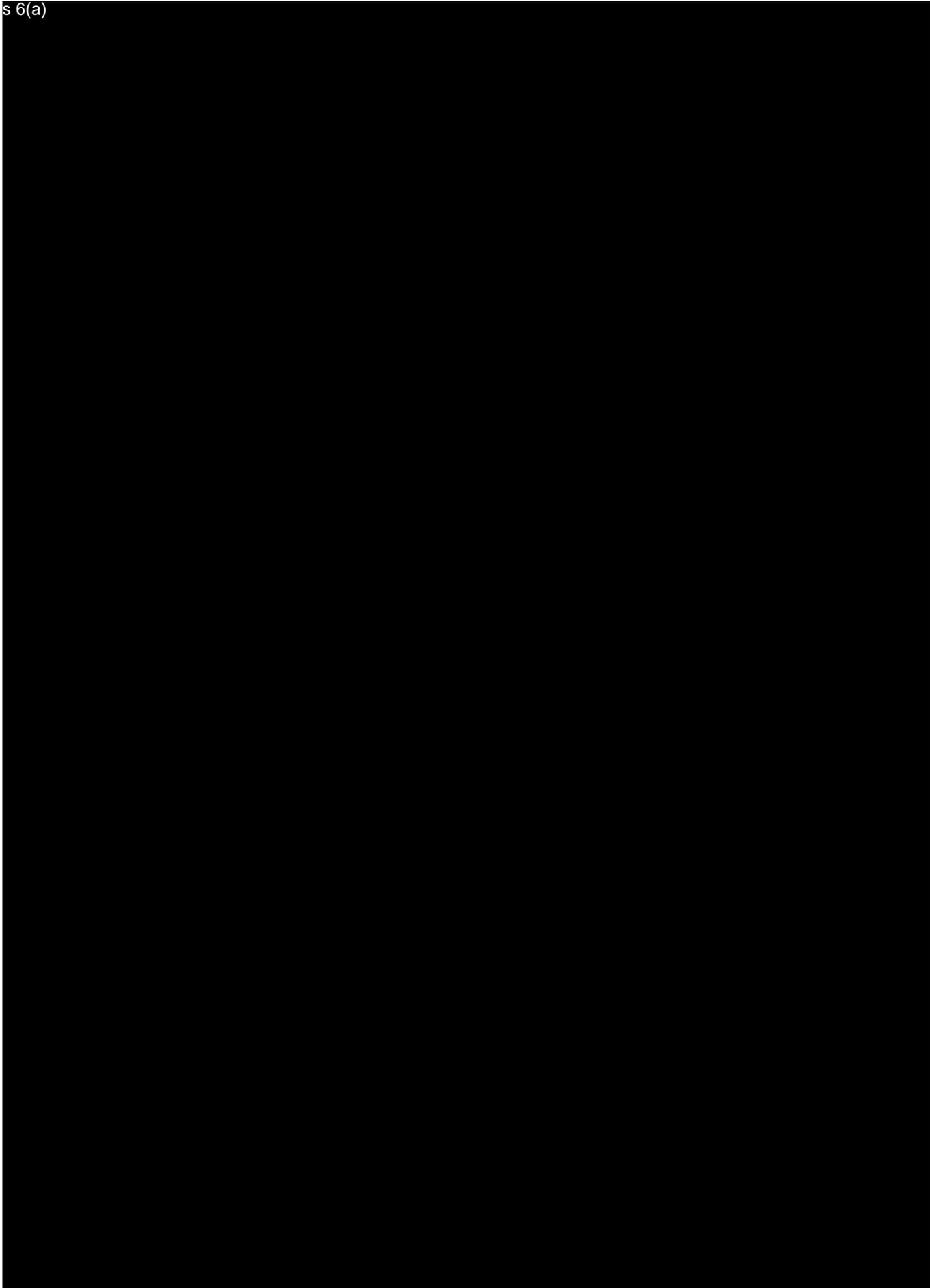
Action is needed by both countries to better prepare for two-way quarantine-free travel

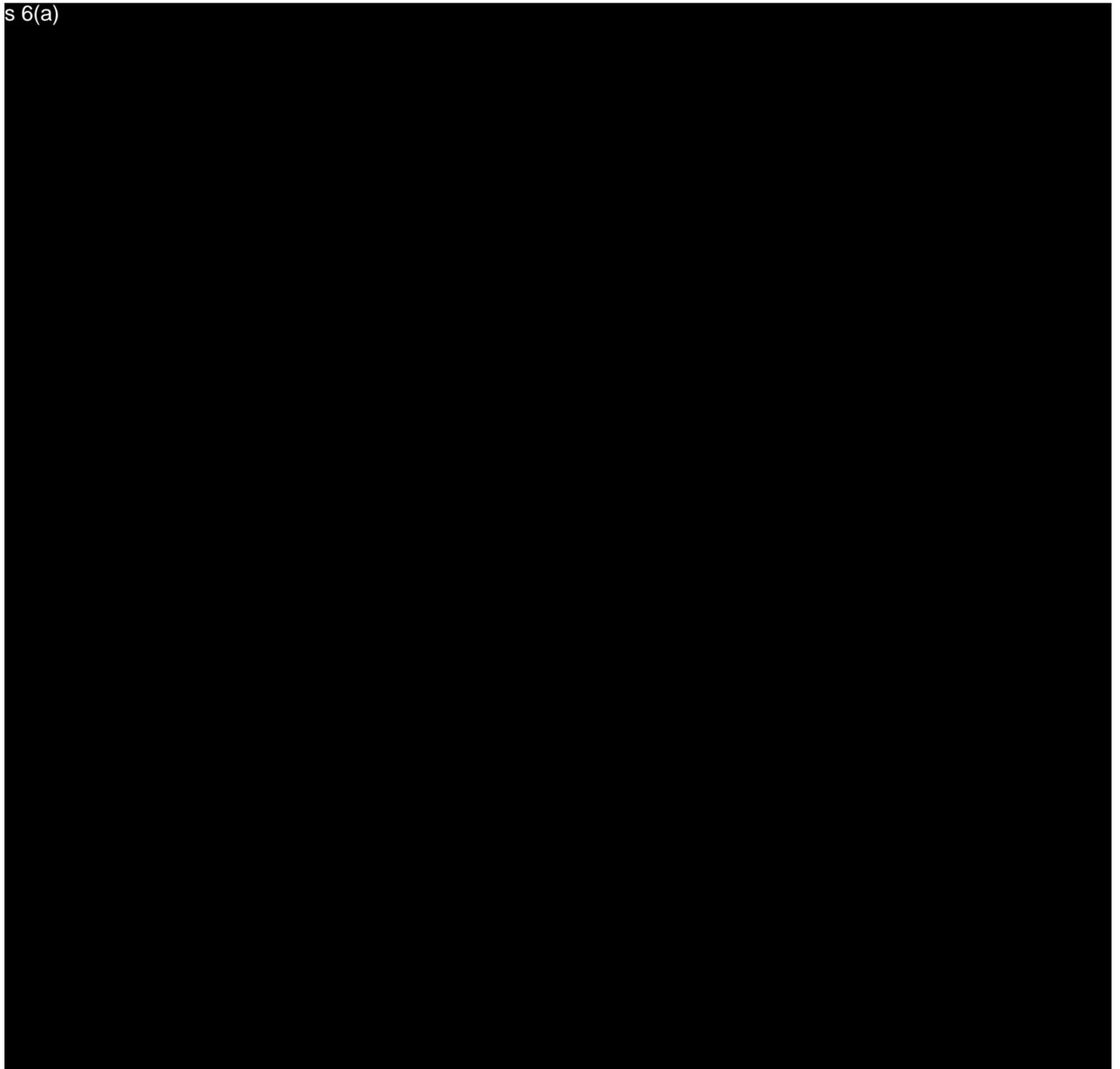
22. Officials have been exploring the mechanisms to take a low risk approach to implementing quarantine-free travel with the Cook Islands because the in-country systems have limited capacity and capability to identify, diagnose, track and trace, isolate and treat COVID-19 cases and contacts of cases. With such strong border control measures, the likelihood of an outbreak occurring is low, but the consequences are very significant, and we need to ensure we have very strong risk mitigations in place.
23. Based on assessment of the assurance and readiness report, we do not recommend commencing two-way quarantine-free travel between the Cook Islands and New Zealand until further preparations have been completed.
24. A significant amount of work has already been done towards enabling quarantine free travel and supporting the Cook Islands in its pandemic planning. The draft Cabinet paper and readiness and assurance report detail this work further. However, more time needs to be spent on the groundwork introducing procedures to detect, diagnose, investigate and contact trace, in support of the Cook Islands' Te Marae Ora (Ministry of Health).
25. On our side there are significant policy decisions to be made in responding to a suspension of quarantine free travel that may create precedent for other areas of New Zealand's COVID-19 response. For instance, an alternative approach to managed isolation may be required if a large number of travellers needed to come home quickly from the Cook Islands.
26. These actions will ensure that between the two countries, we have robust plans, processes, capacity and capability to keep COVID-19 out of the Cook Islands as far as is practicable, but also respond quickly and safely to any suspected or confirmed cases that may occur.

27. The Cook Islands has declared itself COVID-free. The technical assessment by New Zealand officials was a point in time public health assessment to determine that the risk of COVID-19 is sufficiently low for the purpose of implementing quarantine free travel.
28. Given the very low risk of transmission of COVID-19 from the Cook Islands to New Zealand, we consider one-way quarantine free travel would be safe to commence. If travellers (residents of the Cook Islands) are to return to the Cook Islands before two-way quarantine free arrangements are in place, precautionary pre-departure measures (including those in place currently) could include:
- Pre-departure testing (currently a unilateral requirement of the Cook Islands)
 - Passenger declaration that they have not been in close contact with a person who has COVID-19 or in close contact with higher risk groups, such as border workers in the previous 14 days
 - If necessary, a period of self-isolation prior to departure
 - If agreed with the Cook Islands, self-isolation for a period of time on return.

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In-country measures

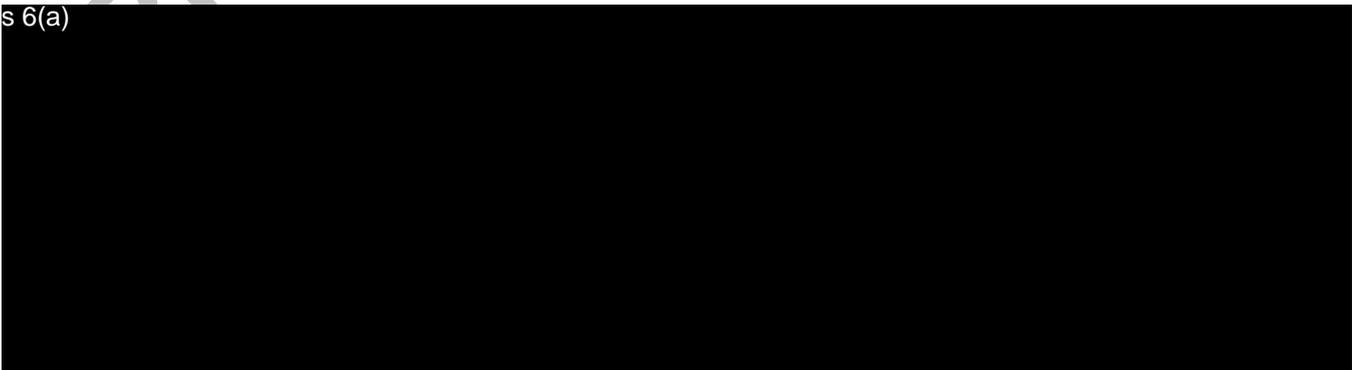
52. The existing health presence at the border will be extended to include a secondary health assessment of individuals who are travelling quarantine-free routes.
53. A digital pre-departure health declaration will be required at check-in in New Zealand. This will help identify individuals for a secondary health assessment to help prevent COVID-19 positive individuals, including those who are pre-symptomatic or asymptomatic, from entering the Cook Islands. The declaration can also be used on check-in in the Cook Islands should the Cook Islands require it.
54. Despite strong controls, border workers are more likely to come into contact with COVID-19 than the general population of New Zealand. To provide a level of assurance that COVID-19 does not enter the Cook Islands from these individuals, these individuals:

- a. will need to have had a COVID-19 test after their last day of work before their holiday
 - b. will not be able to travel if they are awaiting the results of a COVID-19 test.
55. Random temperature checks for both departing and arriving passengers will be implemented because it can potentially help identify symptomatic individuals. Random temperature checks will also provide visible reassurance to passengers that health monitoring is taking place and will reinforce the expectation not to travel while symptomatic. Individuals who fail a temperature check or show symptoms will be referred for a secondary health assessment.
56. New Zealand public health officials have assessed that the public health risk from sharing air crew between quarantine-free and non-quarantine free flights is low and we do not propose to require separate air crew.
57. Existing aviation border procedures will remain in place with some additional enhanced controls:
- a. to ensure that only those that have been lawfully in either the Cook Islands or New Zealand for the past 14 days be eligible for quarantine-free travel
 - b. to ensure that health screening declarations and checks are used by Cook Islands Immigration in conjunction with Te Marae Ora to make additional decisions on passengers' eligibility to travel.
58. Significant work on policy and operational solutions has already been undertaken on these aspects and this is detailed further in the draft Cabinet paper.

Contingency Planning and Outbreak Response

59. Maritime and air border controls are reasonable but, as we have seen in New Zealand with the August outbreak in Auckland and several small clusters since, outbreaks are a possibility and the impacts can be significant.
60. Should there be a case of unknown source or outbreak of COVID-19 discovered in New Zealand or the Cook Islands, the Arrangement includes provisions for information sharing and a commitment to jointly decide on measures to address any issues. Given the high levels of regular communications between New Zealand and Cook Islands' agencies, officials anticipate that rapid and practical solutions will be sought if and when necessary. The priority remains to keep COVID-19 out of the Pacific and our joint response to any potential outbreaks will reflect this.

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Management of quarantine-free travel operation and travel disruption

63. Any quarantine-free travel initiative with another country will carry risks of outbreak, and consequent risks of travel disruption. These risks need to be balanced against the economic and social benefits of enabling such travel, and mitigated to the extent possible through the Arrangements that are negotiated, through outbreak planning and preparation, and clear communications to travellers when quarantine-free travel commences about what they should expect and prepare for.
64. Assessment to confirm that both parties have good systems in place to prevent and control an outbreak as a condition of implementation of quarantine-free travel is the primary way of minimising the risk that operation of quarantine-free travel may need to be significantly disrupted or suspended once it has commenced.
65. As a contingency, New Zealand health officials have made significant progress developing a draft response framework (attached as Appendix Two) for use should any indicators of heightened risk present in either country, such as the discovery of community cases. The draft framework envisages a graduated set of response measures to contain and manage the outbreak, depending on the level of public health risk presented by a situation. It also provides a process for Cook Island and New Zealand officials to consult regarding any concerns on safety, integrity or efficacy of quarantine free travel arrangements, criteria for considering a change to operation of quarantine-free travel and an escalation process if decisions are required.
66. Any outbreak will be context specific and the Government will need to receive advice from me about a risk-proportionate public health response, and from relevant agencies about a proportionate and feasible consular and operational response.
67. From a practical perspective, the "worst case scenario", which would present the greatest challenge to manage in terms of disruption to travellers would be an outbreak in the Cook Islands, where, depending on scale, there may be a need to respond by suspending inbound quarantine-free travel to New Zealand; and where the Cook Islands may judge it necessary for travellers to return to New Zealand in a short period of time, to alleviate pressure on the small capacity of the Cook Islands health system.

68. That scenario may create demand for potentially up to several thousand New Zealanders to return quickly. Responding to this would be challenging within current policy settings for:
- a. New Zealand’s Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ) system: which requires travellers to enter MIQ facilities (MIQF) for 14 days and secure a space through the Managed Isolation Allocation System (MIAS). In the likely event that managed isolation is at capacity when there is a suspension, a small number of emergency allocations can be made available, otherwise travellers need to shelter in place until space is available.
 - b. Consular support to New Zealanders offshore: which is guided by the general principle that travellers should be prepared to bear the risks of travel disruption. Anyone who wishes to return to New Zealand is currently required to do so on commercial flights as Government-arranged repatriation flights are not currently available. But regular scheduled services to the Cook Islands may not be enough to return all New Zealand travellers in a short timeframe. For the duration of any travel disruption, travellers who remain offshore are also expected to meet their own in-country costs, unless eligible in certain limited circumstances for a consular loan to be made.
69. For a ‘worst case scenario’, approaches in these areas may need to be revisited. Table 1 below provides a brief initial outline of possibilities.

Table 1: Potential needs and options in the event the Arrangement is suspended, and a large number of travellers need to return to New Zealand quickly

Policy setting	Possible response options	Considerations
Managed Isolation and Quarantine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reimpose the standard MIQF requirements. This would require the MIQF’s to maintain reserve capacity. • If travellers return within a grace period (eg, 72-96 hours) require self-isolation at home with monitoring and testing requirements. • A combination of MIQF for a set period, followed by a place of their choosing for a further set period, including testing requirements. • Isolate in a bespoke MIQF, if rapid mass repatriation is required and there is no capacity at standard MIQF facilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MIQF capacity – the system is largely booked until February. There is limited emergency reserve capacity. • Whether travellers would need to meet the cost of MIQF. • Health system capacity to implement and monitor alternative quarantine options, such as self-isolation at home in small communities.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • other measures as appropriate to the assessed health risk of travellers. 	
Repatriation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air NZ to provide additional commercial services to bring travellers back to New Zealand within a grace period, with cost to be met by travellers. • Require travellers to self-isolate in the Cook Islands and keep pre-booked return flights – commercial viability for the airline is potentially an issue if flights to the Cook Islands are empty. • Government-organised repatriation flights. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disrupted travel as a result of change to government policy will likely not be covered by travel insurance. • Air New Zealand’s ability to put on additional flights quickly. • Commercial viability considerations for the airline. • Equity considerations, eg, for travellers in other parts of the world who must organise and pay for their own return to New Zealand. • Whether travellers would bear the cost.
Consular financial assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm that travellers need to be prepared to bear their own in-country costs of travel disruption. • Set aside contingency funding for provision of support for in-country costs in event of delay. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equity considerations.

Quarantine-free travel should commence gradually once preparatory work is completed

70. Commencing quarantine free travel with the Cook Islands can be envisaged while there are no community cases in New Zealand with an unknown source.

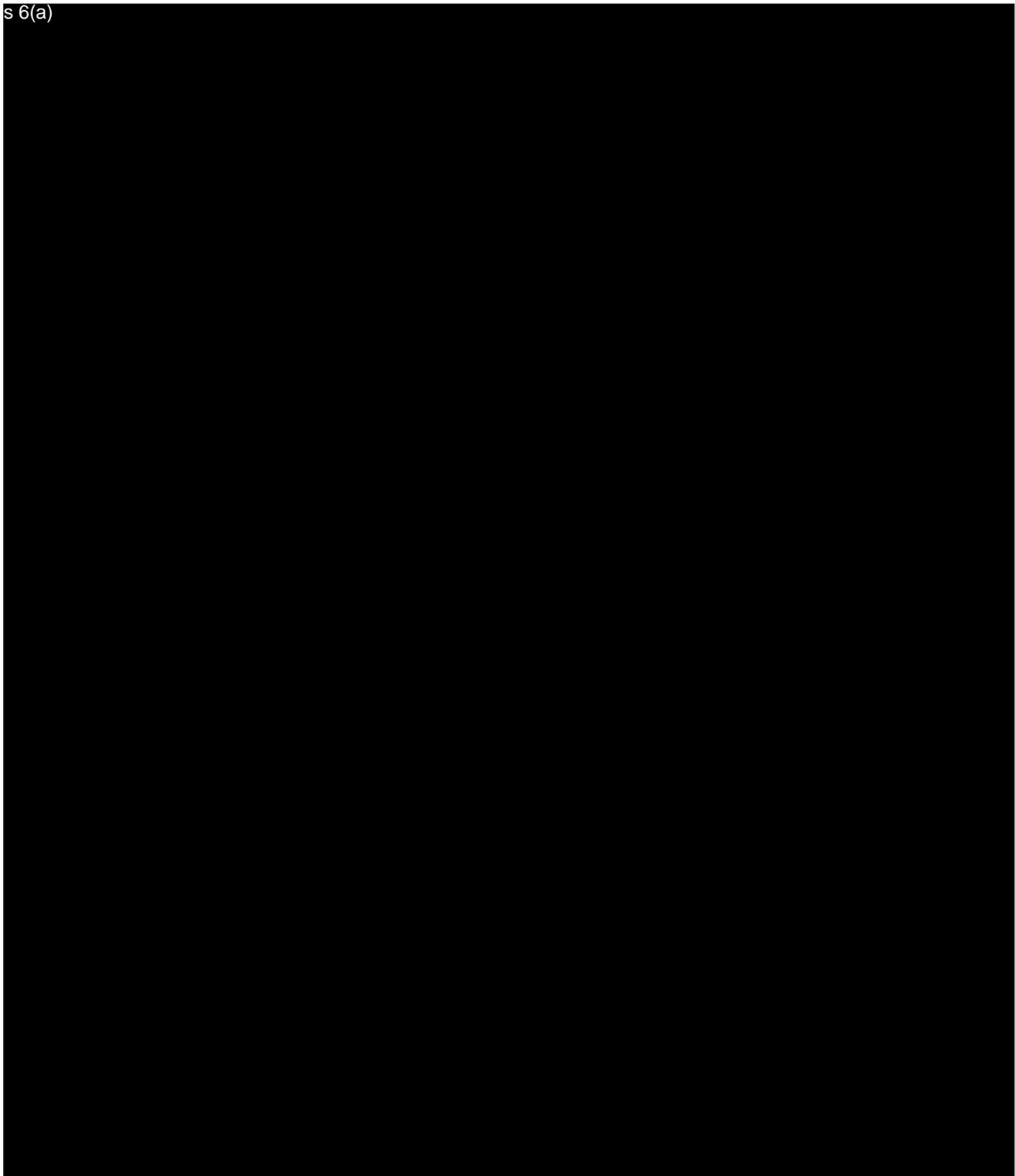
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72. New Zealand has a higher risk tolerance of COVID-19 than the Cook Islands, with existing experience of successfully managing COVID-19 cases and now some experience of actively and iteratively adjusting our systems and processes at the border and in our public health measures in response. However, being in a global pandemic, New Zealand will continue to receive cases of COVID-19 into quarantine facilities, and even with infection prevention control measures and public health measures working to contain

any transmission of COVID-19, there will always be a small risk of transmission. Therefore, there is also a low risk of COVID-19 entering the Cook Islands from New Zealand.

73. It is clear that we need to strengthen our risk mitigations and it is recommended that two-way quarantine-free travel does not commence until further preparatory work outlined in this briefing is completed.

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Equity

79. The impacts of COVID-19 are felt differentially across New Zealand communities. Māori and Pacific communities and those living with disabilities, in poorer circumstances and crowded or institutional settings bear a greater portion of both health and economic impacts and risks. This differential impact within New Zealand is magnified globally. Pacific Island countries are experiencing significant economic and health impacts, especially those with formerly high tourism industries such as the Cook Islands.
80. Delaying the commencement of two-way quarantine-free travel between the Cook Islands and New Zealand until preparatory work is completed will reduce the risk of an outbreak which might otherwise disproportionately impact New Zealand and Cook Island Māori.
81. Māori and Pacific people are likely highly represented in high-risk border work. Our position on higher-risk border workers requiring a test prior to travel means that Māori and Pacific people may be disproportionately affected by the impacts of a mandatory pre-departure test. Officials are considering operational measures to ensure that their testing cycles match their travel requirements to at least partially mitigate these impacts.

Next steps

82. The Ministry will continue to work with our Cook Island on strengthening plans, capacity and capability and developing contingency plans.
83. Officials are meeting with you on 23 November 2020 to discuss the issues raised in this paper.

ENDS