

Memorandum

DHB preparedness and planning for COVID-19 surge testing during the 2020/21 summer holiday period

Date due to MO:	3 December 2020	Action required by:	N/A
Security level:	IN CONFIDENCE	Health Report number:	HR20202197
To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response		
Cc:	Hon Andrew Little, Minister of Health		

Contact for telephone discussion

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Action for Private Secretaries

N/A

Date dispatched to MO:

DHB preparedness and planning for COVID-19 surge testing during the 2020/21 summer holiday period

Purpose

1. To advise you of the Ministry of Health's work with DHBs to assess their preparedness and to support their contingency planning for surge testing in the event of COVID-19 clusters or outbreaks during the 2020/21 summer holiday period (13 December 2020 to 9 February 2021). It supports the overall health preparedness work that has been underway across the Ministry and the wider health and disability system.
2. This memo supplements the advice around testing which the Ministry provided for your recent paper, COVID-19 response planning for the summer holiday period which was considered at the Cabinet Business Committee.

Background / context

3. With large numbers of New Zealanders likely to travel over the Christmas/summer holiday period 2020/21 and attend events and gatherings, we need to proactively reinforce public health messaging to help mitigate the potential for apathy/fatigue. We are also aware that other countries experienced a large increase in COVID-19 infections throughout the European summer (June-August), likely due to relaxed behaviours and attitudes.
4. This reinforces the importance of:
 - DHBs having comprehensive, robust plans to provide access and capacity for testing where they are holiday concentrations of people, and to scale up testing if required; and
 - The Ministry having clear oversight of their plans.
5. The Ministry is working closely with DHBs to assess their preparedness and support their planning in the event of COVID-19 clusters or more widespread outbreaks during the 2020/21 summer.
6. Our efforts are focused on three key areas: testing, contact tracing and providing managed isolation / quarantine environments for confirmed or probable cases.
7. This memo focuses on testing and supplements the advice around testing which the Ministry provided for your recent paper, *COVID-19 response planning for the summer holiday period*, for the Cabinet Business Committee.
8. In early November 2020 the Testing Operations team within the Ministry's COVID-19 Directorate asked DHBs to advise of their preparedness and planning for surge testing during the coming summer holiday season. In particular, we asked them to outline their preparedness and planning across six areas:
 - Surge planning / ability to increase capacity for testing

- Regional testing collaboration canvassed to meet increased population spikes
 - Clarity of public communications around the availability of testing (when and where)
 - Preparedness for seasonal increase to local population (i.e. holiday makers)
 - Oversight of large events occurring within their region district
 - Trained testing workforce.
9. In a number of instances, the Ministry's enquiries and follow-up have prompted DHBs to formally assess and review their current level of preparedness and contingency planning.
10. The Ministry's assessment of DHBs' current (as of 1 December) preparedness and planning is indicated in Appendix 1 via a colour-coded table where:
- green indicates their preparedness is assessed as adequate and their contingency planning well advanced;
 - orange indicates there are issues with their preparedness and/or planning is still in the early stages; and
 - red indicates significant capacity or preparedness challenges.
11. Our assessment, as indicated in Appendix 1, is a moment-in-time snapshot. DHBs' preparedness and planning are work-in-progress. We have been working alongside DHBs to support their planning. Over the last few weeks, several red areas have moved to orange, and orange areas to green, and most ratings are now green. We continue to work with DHBs with current orange and red ratings, with the intent that by 12 December all ratings will be green.
12. The Ministry's Testing Operations team is working closely with DHBs to assess their preparedness, support their planning and facilitate their rapid access to additional testing resources and support – both from within and outside their regions – in the event surge testing is required.
13. This work is progressing alongside the parallel work of the Ministry's Contact Tracing and Managed Isolation & Quarantine (MIQ) teams.
14. In addition, the Ministry's Public Health Group is establishing a 30-40 person deep taskforce able to be deployed anywhere in New Zealand to support PHUs and DHBs in the event of an outbreak or outbreaks. Advice regarding this work – which is aligned with the Testing Operations, Contact Tracing and MIQ work – will be provided to your office separately by the Public Health Group.

The Ministry's assessment of DHB's current preparedness

Surge planning / ability to increase testing capacity

15. DHBs are conscious that COVID-19 resurgence over the summer holiday period is a very real possibility and have developed comprehensive contingency plans to ensure they are well placed to implement a robust and coordinated response should an outbreak occur.
16. The three most likely sources of a COVID-19 outbreak in their various regions have been identified as: arrivals into New Zealand, border-facing workers and visitors /

holiday-makers from other regions. The first two of these are covered by robust existing processes for testing at the border and in the community. Our focus in the recent planning has been on strengthening community testing related to visitors and holiday-makers.

17. In general, the DHBs assessed as most likely to experience testing capacity challenges are those also most likely to experience significant, short-term population spikes which may significantly increase demand for testing. For example, Tairāwhiti, which will host the Rhythm and Vines festival, and Waikato, which contains the Raglan and Thames-Coromandel holiday hotspots. Were a significant outbreak to occur in either region, DHBs will give support to their neighbours.
18. While there is variation across DHBs and PHUs, the sector has built-in capacity within its testing infrastructure to respond to an upsurge in demand due to community transmission and spread. Contingency plans include:
 - Deploying mobile testing units;
 - Standing up testing facilities in areas forecast to experience considerable population increases due to the influx of holiday makers;
 - Calling on support from neighbouring DHBs;
 - Supplementing BAU testing workforce by training nursing and other clinical staff for testing. These supplementary testers can be called up to staff community testing centres where staff have needed to be reassigned, for example to provide mobile testing services at holiday hotspots. Several DHBs have also trained and used dental technicians and hygienists to provide further back-up testing capacity. This ensures that even in the event of a surge that at least some balancing of staff wellbeing can be achieved;
 - Making greater use of hospital emergency departments, urgent care clinics and GP practices; and
 - Providing testing services through Māori and Pacific health providers and at Marae and other community centres.

Regional testing collaboration canvassed to meet increased population spikes

19. Smaller DHBs and DHBs likely to experience the greatest demand for testing over the summer holiday period have clearly signalled to the Ministry that the extra resources they can mobilise are limited and, if they experience a significant increase in demand for testing, they will need support from neighbouring DHBs.
20. In early November the Ministry asked DHBs to advise us of the extent to which they have canvassed or formally established or, at least, investigated regional collaboration – both within their region and with neighbouring DHBs.
21. DHBs' responses confirmed that there is a highly collaborative culture across the health sector which we are working to further develop and embed.
22. Several DHBs already have formal collaborative arrangements in place with neighbouring DHBs which they can call on as needed. For example, the three Auckland region DHBs (Auckland, Waitemata and Counties Manukau) operate as a single entity

to much of their services, and they also work closely with the Northern DHB as needed. These collaborative arrangements were used to good effect during August when testing demand spiked. A further example is the formal collaborative relationship between the Canterbury and West Coast DHB.

Clarity of public communications around the availability of testing

23. The primary and most universally-accessible channels for advising the people where and when they can be tested are the Healthpoint website and the Healthline toll-free number. Other channels include DHBs' websites and Facebook pages, the Ministry's and COVID-19 websites, the All of Government communications campaign and local media. DHBs are also ensuring flyers and posters are available at holiday hotspots and events. Other communications include posters at GP practices, pharmacies and by medicine shelves at supermarkets. The Ministry's communications team are regularly engaging with DHBs and PHUs to ensure public messaging is kept up-to-date.
24. Furthermore, specific COVID-19 information will be included in public health information that is regularly provided at events and holiday hotspots, including ensuring that the regular messages around physical distancing, hand hygiene and staying at home if unwell continue to be reinforced.

Seasonal increases to local population and large events

25. To assist DHBs with their planning, we have shared with them a MBIE / DPMC paper which:
 - identifies holiday hotspots such as Pauanui, Mount Manganui, Coromandel and Raglan which are expected to experience large influxes of holiday-makers; and
 - lists all known public events likely to be attended by more than 10,000 people.
26. DHBs have good visibility of their holiday hotspots and are well aware of the need to ensure testing is easily accessible to holiday-makers.
27. DHBs' main approach to ensuring testing is readily available and accessible to holiday makers is to:
 - increase capacity at hospital Emergency Departments;
 - ensure GP practices are prepared to test holiday-makers and other "walk ins" not on their books; and
 - deploy community testing centres, pop-ups and mobile testing units as required, depending on holiday-maker numbers and the distance of holiday hotspots (e.g. camping grounds) from existing testing facilities
28. Large events present a different challenge.
29. As a rule, for shorter (one-day or less) events such as one-day cricket matches DHBs have not planned to stand up testing facilities at these events. This is consistent with the approach to the Bledisloe rugby tests where the focus is on public health messaging regarding getting a test if you have symptoms.
30. Large-scale, multi-day events such as Rhythm and Vines (Gisborne, Tairāwhiti, five days, est. 23,000 in attendance) and Christian Music Festival (Waipa, Waikato, four days, est. 20,000 in attendance) are a different proposition and present a different challenge

given that many attendees will be visitors from other regions. The major events identified by MBIE are listed in Appendix 2.

31. While some DHBs have expressed a reluctance to stand up event-based as opposed to location-based testing facilities, the Ministry has made clear its expectation that on-site testing facilities be available - if necessary, using the first aid / medical facilities which are required to be on-site. DHBs currently use existing facilities including hospital EDs, GP practices and CTCs, and ensure there is widespread public messaging advising where people can get tested. We are continuing to finalise the multi-day event plans with some DHBs.
32. We have been emphatic in our messaging that if people are symptomatic, testing needs to be readily available to enable them to be tested as soon as possible rather than waiting till they are back home – particularly given that some festival / event attendees may stay on for several days or travel elsewhere before returning home.
33. DHBs preference to use existing testing facilities rather than stand up specific facilities for events is likely due to a hesitation to commit resources and staff to facilities which may be poorly utilised. This is also a contributing factor to low testing rates in remote, rural locations where funding DHBs on a per test basis does not cover all of the costs they incur in providing access to testing.
34. The Ministry is engaging with DHBs to ascertain the extent of their concerns and is exploring alternative funding mechanisms to address this issue and ensure that funding considerations do not hinder the availability or equitability of testing.

Trained testing workforce

35. Any large clusters or outbreaks, particularly in remote or lesser resourced locations, will potentially place considerable pressure on testing resources. While DHBs have all developed contingency plans, in the event they need to significantly scale up testing, their ability to deploy the additional trained testing staff varies.
36. Several have advised that their staff are experiencing “testing fatigue”, hence their caution in committing to stand up additional testing facilities. Notwithstanding this, all DHBs’ plans confirm they are able to call on additional – albeit, in some instances, small numbers of – trained testing staff if needed.
37. These mostly involve standing-up testing staff that include registered nurses, trainee nurses and other clinical personnel not currently deployed for testing on a routine basis.
38. Several DHBs have also trained dental therapists for testing to boost testing capacity and stand in for CTC staffers needing to be redeployed elsewhere. Deploying dental therapists is a practical and cost-effective approach as additional premises and PPE do not need to be sourced to enable them to carry out testing at short notice.
39. DHBs’ stand-by testing arrangements were successfully utilised in August when testing numbers surged nationally from around 4,000 a day to 10,000+ a day for most of the month and 20,000+ for a brief period.
40. DHBs have advised that their contingency plans include mobilising these supplementary testing workforces. However, several DHBs, for example Tairāwhiti and Northern, have advised that in the event of a significant outbreak, while they can

mobilise additional staff, they will also need to call on external out of region testing support if demand significantly increases.

41. The Ministry has acknowledged the limitations of their testing capacity and is working across DHBs to gain visibility of their testing resources and availability for deployment in other regions.

Next steps

42. The Ministry will continue to work closely with DHBs as they develop and refine their holiday testing plans, particularly in finalising the process for large-scale, multi-day events.
43. In particular, we are supporting them to identify and mitigate any perceived vulnerabilities or lack of resources. Promoting and facilitating cross-DHB collaboration and sharing of resources is a key part of this process.
44. We will update you further on this work in the next two weeks, particularly advising of any identified issues or logistical considerations which could compromise the sector's ability to deliver scaled-up, accessible testing if required.

Sue Gordon
Deputy Chief Executive

Covid-19 Health System Response

3 December 2020

PROACTIVELY RELEASED

Appendix One: DHB preparedness for COVID-19 surge testing during the 2020/21 holiday season – as assessed by the Ministry of Health based on information provided by DHB, as at 2 December 2020

	Surge planning/ ability to increase capacity for testing	Regional testing collaboration canvassed to meet increased population spikes	Clarity to public in communicating where testing is available	Prepared for seasonal increase to local population (i.e. holiday makers)	Oversight of large events occurring within district	Testing workforce sufficient in terms of both staff numbers and swabbing training
Northland						
Auckland / Waitemata / Counties Manukau						
Waikato						
Lakes						
Tairāwhiti						
Bay of Plenty						
Hawkes Bay						
Taranaki						
Whanganui						
MidCentral		(NA)				
Capital & Coast / Hutt Valley						
Wairarapa						
Nelson Marlborough						
West Coast						
Canterbury						
South Canterbury						
Southern						

Appendix Two: Major known events (estimated 10,000+ attendees) during 2020/21 summer

Event	Location	DHB	Start Date	End Date	Estimated Attendance
TSB Festival of Lights	New Plymouth	Taranaki	19/12/2020	31/01/2021	150,000
Bread & Circus - World Buskers Festival	Christchurch	Canterbury	31/01/2021	15/02/2021	50,000
2021 Tupuna (Tūpuna) Maunga Authority Maungauika Summer Festival	Auckland	Auckland	01/01/2021	31/03/2021	50,000
World of WearableArt:Up Close	Wellington city	Capital & Coast	12/12/2020	14/02/2021	43,000
New Years - Queenstown and Wanaka	Queenstown Lakes District	Southern	31/12/2020	31/12/2020	30,000
Rhythm and Vines	Gisborne	Tairāwhiti	28/12/2020	01/01/2021	23,000
Kapiti Food Fair	Kapiti	Capital & Coast	05/12/2020	05/12/2020	22,000
Buskers International Festival	Auckland	Auckland	30/01/2021	01/02/2021	20,000
Petone Fair	Lower Hutt	Hutt	TBC	TBC	20,000
Six60 Concert	Hawke's Bay	Hawke's Bay	23/01/2021	23/01/2021	20,000
Christian Music Festival	Waipa	Hawke's Bay	30/01/2021	02/01/2021	20,000
Taupō Summer Concert	Taupō	Lakes	30/01/2021	30/01/2021	16,000
Gibbston Valley Winery Summer Concert	Queenstown Lakes District	Southern	23/01/2021	23/01/2021	16,000
2021 L.A.B.	Auckland	Auckland	27/03/2021	27/03/2021	15,500
Maori All Blacks v Pacifika Team	Waikato	Waikato	05/12/2020	05/12/2020	15,000

Wellington Cup Day	Upper Hutt	Hutt	30/01/2021	30/01/2021	15,000
Six60 Concert	New Plymouth	Taranaki	TBC		15,000
Bay Dreams	Tauranga	Bay of Plenty	03/01/2021	03/01/2021	15,000
Pak'N Save Papamoa Christmas In Toyland Parade 2020	Tauranga	Bay of Plenty	13/12/2020	13/12/2020	15,000
The Mount Festival of Multisport	Tauranga	Bay of Plenty	23/12/2020	23/12/2020	15,000
2021 SeePort Festival Summer Festival	Auckland	Auckland	31/01/2021	31/01/2021	14,000
Great Kiwi Beer Festival 2021	Christchurch	Canterbury	30/01/2021	30/01/2021	12,000
Dunedin Santa Parade	Otago	Southern	06/12/2020	06/12/2020	12,000
Kite Day 2021	Christchurch	Canterbury	30/01/2021	30/01/2021	10,000
A Very Palmy Christmas	Palmerston North/Manawatu	MidCentral	03/12/2020	06/12/2020	10,000
Brighton Gala Day	Otago	Southern	24/01/2021	24/01/2021	10,000
Downtown Shakedown	Wellington city	Capital & Coast	05/12/2020	05/12/2020	10,000
New Year's Eve in the Octagon	Otago	Southern	31/12/2020	31/12/2020	10,000
Whare Flat Folk Festival	Otago	Southern	30/12/2020	03/01/2021	10,000
Rhythm and Alps	Queenstown Lakes District	Southern	29/12/2020	31/12/2020	10,000
Waihi Beach Summer Fair	Waihi Beach	Waikato	04/01/2021	09/01/2021	10,000
Tauranga's Christmas In The Park 2020	Tauranga	Bay of Plenty	05/12/2020	05/12/2020	10,000
International Summer of Cricket -	Tauranga	Bay of Plenty	26/12/2020	30/12/2020	10,000

BLACKCAPS vs. Pakistan					
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Source: MBIE / DPMC

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