

# Briefing

## Interim health advice on commencement of trans-Tasman quarantine-free travel

**Date due to MO:** 1 April 2021

**Action required by:** N/A

**Security level:** IN CONFIDENCE

**Health Report number:** 20210812

**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,<br>System Strategy and Policy | 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 Withdrawn |  |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:

# Interim health advice on commencement of trans-Tasman quarantine-free travel

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**Security level:** IN CONFIDENCE

**Date:** 1 April 2021

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

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## Purpose of report

1. This report outlines my interim advice to Cabinet on the commencement of trans-Tasman quarantine-free travel (QFT).

## Summary

2. On 22 March 2021, Cabinet agreed in principle that New Zealand will commence two-way quarantine-free travel (QFT) with Australia in April 2021.
3. You will report back to Cabinet on 6 April 2021, including with my interim health assessment regarding the commencement of QFT from Australia.
4. I will provide you with talking points updating the Australian COVID-19 situation on 6 April 2021, prior to that Cabinet meeting.
5. As part of that report back, I have advised, notwithstanding the current community cases in Queensland, that I consider the risk of transmission of COVID-19 overall from Australia to New Zealand is low and that **QFT from Australia would currently be safe to commence, with the exception of Queensland, on which a further update will be provided prior to commencement.**
6. I will provide you with my final health advice prior to commencement, once that date is known. That advice will include a reassessment of the Queensland COVID-19 situation, and if applicable, any additional measures to be taken, taking into account the latest information on the COVID-19 situation in Australia (all states and territories).
7. I will also provide you with supplementary advice by 16 April 2021 on how the contact tracing system will prepare to manage a scenario where there is a need to trace a significant volume of medium and/or high-risk traveller cohorts over and above what previous outbreaks have required this potential scenario.

## Recommendations

We recommend you:

- a) **Note** my interim health advice to Cabinet that QFT from Australia would currently be safe to commence, with the exception of Queensland. **Noted**
- b) **Note** that talking points updating the Australian situation will be provided to you for the 6 April 2021 Cabinet meeting. **Noted**
- c) **Note** that supplementary advice will be provided to you by Friday 16 April 2021 on how the contact tracing system will prepare to manage a scenario where there is a need to trace a significant volume of medium and/or high-risk traveller cohorts over and above what previous outbreaks have required in this potential scenario. **Noted**
- d) **Note** that prior to the commencement of trans-Tasman QFT, I will provide Cabinet with my final health advice, including a reassessment of the Queensland COVID-19 situation, and if applicable, any additional measures to be taken, taking into account the latest information on the COVID-19 situation in Australia (all states and territories). **Noted**



Dr Ashley Bloomfield  
**Director-General of Health**

Hon Chris Hipkins  
**Minister for COVID-19 Response**

Date:

Date:

# Interim health advice on commencement of trans-Tasman quarantine-free travel

## Background and context

8. On 22 March 2021 Cabinet agreed in principle that New Zealand will commence two-way quarantine-free travel (QFT) with Australia in April 2021, subject to Cabinet being satisfied that several operational, technical and health requirements have been progressed [CAB-21-MIN-0081].
9. You will report back to Cabinet on 6 April 2021, including with my interim health assessment regarding the commencement of QFT from Australia.
10. The Prime Minister has publicly indicated that she will announce a commencement date for QFT from Australia after the 6 April 2021 Cabinet meeting.

## Interim health advice for trans-Tasman QFT

### Current COVID-19 situation in Australia

11. The table below outlines the current COVID-19 situation as at 3pm on 31 March 2021. This information has been provided by Australia's National Focal Point (NFP).

|                              | Locally acquired or under investigation in the last 72 hrs | Date of most recent notification of locally acquired case | Active cases | Tests per 100,000 (last 7 days) | Percent testing positivity (last 7 days) |
|------------------------------|--|---|--------------|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>Australia</b>             | <b>11</b>  | <b>31/3/2021</b>  | <b>159</b>   | <b>1253</b>                     | <b>&lt;0.1%</b>                          |
| Australian Capital Territory | 0  | 9/07/20   | 0            | 1160                            | 0.0%                                     |
| New South Wales              | 0  | 16/03/21  | 52           | 857                             | <0.1%                                    |
| Northern Territory           | 0  | 1/07/20   | 2            | 2937                            | <0.1%                                    |
| Queensland                   | 11   | 31/3/21   | 78           | 1806                            | <0.1%                                    |
| South Australia              | 0  | 12/3/21   | 11           | 1192                            | <0.1%                                    |
| Tasmania                     | 0  | 11/08/20  | 0            | 892                             | 0.0%                                     |
| Victoria                     | 0  | 25/2/21   | 1            | 1519                            | <0.1%                                    |
| Western Australia            | 0  | 1/2/21  | 15           | 704                             | <0.1%                                    |

### Queensland cases of COVID-19

12. Since 26 March 2021, Queensland health authorities have reported 11 locally acquired COVID-19 cases. Due to these cases, Greater Brisbane entered a 3-day lockdown period from 1700 29 March 2021 to 1700 1 April 2021. This lockdown was lifted at noon today (1 April 2021).
13. Two separate clusters have been identified. Nine of these locally acquired cases are linked, while the source or link for the other two cases has not yet been established and source investigation continues.

14. Based on current evidence, my public health advice is that it is safe for trans-Tasman QFT to commence in April 2021.
15. This is because the Australian health system is robust, and to-date locally acquired cases of COVID-19 have so far been effectively managed through contact and case management.
16. We are regularly monitoring and evaluating the Australian COVID-19 situation and are engaged with their health authorities as we prepare for the commencement of QFT. Nearer the commencement date, we will reassess the COVID-19 situation in Queensland and any other affected states and territories. We will also provide you further advice on the impact of the cases might have on QFT for people travelling to/from Queensland and any other affected states or territories.

## **New Zealand health readiness for trans-Tasman QFT**

### *Surveillance and testing capacity*

17. On 30 March 2021, 3,343 COVID-19 tests were processed, bringing the weekly total of tests processed last week to more than 35,490 tests. Approximately 178,780 tests have been carried out in the last month. The total number of tests processed by laboratories to date is 1,890,809.
18. This level of testing is well within the baseline capacity of 11,934 tests per day and a surge capacity of around 32,000. We have supplies in stock for approximately 37 days based on the seven-day rolling average. This period can be extended through pooling of tests during a surge if required.
19. If pre-departure testing (PDT) is required for trans-Tasman QFT, this may significantly increase demand on testing.

### *Contact tracing capacity*

20. For trans-Tasman QFT, the Ministry of Health has proposed that the approach to contact tracing travellers should be very similar to our current domestic approach. This will see people who have been at an exposure event classified according to risk level and then managed according to public health advice.
21. The Ministry of Health has confidence in the public health case investigation processes used by Australian health authorities to identify potential contacts and therefore would act in accordance with their contact categorisation.
22. If contacts of an Australian community case were to travel to New Zealand, they would be contacted by the Ministry of Health's National Investigation and Tracing Centre (NITC) and given appropriate advice based on this situation. This would follow Australian health authorities completing a case investigation to identify contacts.
23. If current contact tracing category definitions and management plans are followed as part of trans-Tasman QFT, and we assume that QFT is paused or suspended following notification of community cases in an Australian state or territory, then existing contact tracing capacity is likely to be able to absorb the additional calls required for contacts of a case at a similar level of previous outbreaks.

24. Should there be a need to trace a significant volume of medium and/or high-risk traveller cohorts over and above what previous outbreaks have required, the contact tracing system will need additional capacity to manage this demand. Supplementary advice will be provided to you by Friday 16 April 2021 on how the contact tracing system will prepare to manage this potential scenario.

#### *Airport and Airline readiness*

25. Assessment of airport and airline readiness continues and is subject to Ministry of Health approval of Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs) proposed by each airport wishing to facilitate QFT.
26. Regarding airport readiness, verification walk-throughs by the Ministry of Health's IPC team are scheduled with Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Queenstown airports between 6 and 9 April 2021. Dunedin Airport has advised officials that it intends to operate under QFT. Planning and agency engagement are at an early stage and it is not expected to participate from commencement.
27. This work is expected to be completed by 9 April 2021 and designation reports completed by 16 April 2021. QFT airports and airlines will be scheduled in the upcoming amended Air Border Order once they have satisfied all requirements.

#### *Health and disability system capacity*

28. There are currently no people in hospital with COVID-19 as at 1 April 2021. Hospitals are well-placed to manage cases that do require hospital care and have plans in place to manage a surge in demand associated with new outbreaks.

#### *Border controls*

29. Robust border controls are critical to the continued success of our Elimination Strategy. The air and maritime borders remain closed to non-residents and a limited number of others, except by Ministerial-approved exception.
30. Most arrivals are required to provide evidence of a negative COVID-19 test (with some exceptions) prior to boarding flights to come to New Zealand. Travellers from Australia have been exempted from the requirement for pre-departure testing (PDT) as the risk of COVID-19 is low.
31. Arrivals from countries where PDT is required are also tested on day 0/1 of their arrival in the country and entry into a Managed Isolation or Quarantine Facility. They are also required to isolate until negative results are returned.
32. We also have Orders to ensure a regular testing regime for border workers alongside a suite of other measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 entering via the border.

#### *Control measures, compliance and public sentiment*

33. There remains good support for, and compliance with, the Government's approach and control measures at COVID-19 Alert Level 1.
34. As of 30 March 2021, the New Zealand COVID-19 Tracer App has 2,768,382 registered users. Total poster scans have reached 235,338,298 and users have created 8,863,183

manual diary entries. There have been 795,505 poster scans in the last 24 hours to 1pm 29 March 2021.

35. People are legally required to wear a face mask or covering on all public transport and flights throughout New Zealand at COVID-19 Alert Level 1.
36. There also remains regular public messaging to encourage anyone who has cold or flu symptoms, including muscle aches and fatigue, to get a test and stay home until they have a negative test result.

#### *Consideration of Alert Levels and QFT Response Framework*

37. Based on the evidence known thus far, the Ministry of Health considers that the risk of COVID-19 transmission in New Zealand and in Australia is low.
38. New Zealand is currently at Alert Level 1 with related settings in place that are proportionate to the public health risk to respond effectively to the country's current COVID-19 situation.
39. We have had considerable success in managing community transmission through prompt use of the Alert Level system in the past, and when necessary, there remains a strong case for taking a precautionary approach to maintain our effective Elimination Strategy within the context of QFT.
40. A trans-Tasman QFT Response Framework has been developed through an intensive inter-agency process and has been considered by Cabinet previously. Officials from the Ministry of Health and other agencies have confirmed that it is fit-for-purpose in order to commence two-way QFT. Agencies are working on finalising operational requirements.
41. The Response Framework identifies a graduated series of "levels" based on public health factors. At each level, a range of measures are identified that could be used to respond depending on the specifics of each outbreak. The Response Framework is designed to be flexible.
42. It is linked to our Elimination Strategy and our Alert Levels Framework, and guided by the policy objectives of preventing the introduction of COVID-19 cases into New Zealand, ensuring QFT can operate as normal so long as it is safe to do so, and minimising the impact of any disruption to travellers and operators.
43. The Response Framework also provides the option of a "pause" for a short period if necessary so officials can gather and assess information on an emerging situation. If an outbreak is unlikely to be controlled, the Response Framework provides for a prolonged partial or full suspension of QFT.
44. The Response Framework can evolve as necessary – for example, to incorporate future directions from Cabinet on preferred measures for managing the flow of returning travellers to New Zealand.

#### **Interim advice of the Director-General of Health on the commencement of trans-Tasman QFT (as in 6 April 2021 Cabinet Paper)**

45. The Director-General of Health has advised, notwithstanding the current community cases in Queensland, that he considers the risk of transmission of COVID-19 overall from Australia to New Zealand is low and that **QFT from Australia would currently be safe to**

**commence, with the exception of Queensland, on which a further update will be provided prior to commencement.**

46. In reaching this view the following has been considered:
- a. Whether the spread of COVID-19 case(s) in some or all Australian states and territories has been controlled;
  - b. Whether the Australian Commonwealth Government or individual states and territories can detect COVID-19 cases through robust testing and surveillance;
  - c. Whether the Australian Commonwealth Government or individual states and territories can manage COVID-19 cases through contact tracing and case management;
  - d. Whether the Border controls are adequate for identifying and preventing transmission of COVID-19 and are proportionate to the risk (e.g. eligible travellers will have been in Australia for 14 days or more); and
  - e. Other relevant considerations have been met, including consistency of Australia's COVID-19 controls and decision-making between the state and territories and Commonwealth governments.

*Queensland cases of COVID-19*

47. As at 30 March 2021, Queensland has reported 11 locally acquired cases since 26 March 2021. Due to these cases, Greater Brisbane has entered a 3-day lockdown period from 1700 29 March 2021 to 1 April 2021; this lockdown was lifted at noon today (1 April 2021). Two separate clusters have been identified.
48. Nine of these locally acquired cases are linked, while the source or link for the other two cases has not yet been established and source investigation continues.
49. Overall, the Australian Commonwealth and states and territories have successfully responded to the risk of COVID-19 from its external and internal borders through effective controls, testing and surveillance.
50. Where there have been case(s) appearing in the community, they have been effectively managed through contact and case management. The Ministry of Health continues to monitor and evaluate the situation in Australia.
51. Prior to the commencement of trans-QFT, the Director-General of Health will provide Cabinet further advice, including a reassessment of the Queensland situation, and if applicable any additional measures to be taken, taking into account the latest information on the COVID-19 situation in Australia (all states and territories).

**Next steps**

52. The Ministry of Health will continue to monitor and evaluate the COVID-19 situation in Australia will undertake a reassessment of recent cases in Queensland.
53. We will provide you a set of talking points on the current situation for the 6 April 2021 Cabinet meeting.
54. Supplementary advice will be provided to you by Friday 16 April 2021 on how the contact tracing system will prepare to manage a scenario where there is a need to trace a



significant volume of medium and/or high-risk traveller cohorts over and above what previous outbreaks have required this potential scenario.

55. Prior to the commencement of trans-Tasman QFT, I will provide you and Cabinet with my final health advice, including a reassessment of the Queensland situation, and if applicable, any additional measures to be taken, taking into account the latest information on the COVID-19 situation in Australia (all states and territories).

ENDS.

PROACTIVELY RELEASED