

Briefing

Testing options for unvaccinated individuals travelling out of Auckland on or after 15 December

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| Date due to MO: | 29/11/2021 | Action required by: | 30/11/2021 |
| Security level: | IN CONFIDENCE | Health Report number: | 20212550 |
| To: | Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response | | |
| Copy to: | Hon Andrew Little, Minister of Health Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall, Associate Minister of Health | | |

Contact for telephone discussion

| Name | Position | Telephone |
|-------------------------|---|-----------|
| Bridget White | Deputy Chief Executive, COVID-19 Health System Response | s 9(2)(a) |
| Darryl Carpenter | Group Manager Testing and Supply, 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 Withdrawn | |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:

Testing options for unvaccinated individuals travelling out of Auckland on or after 15 December

Security level: IN CONFIDENCE **Date:** 29 November 2021

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

Purpose of report

1. This report sets out the options for testing those unvaccinated travellers who leave Auckland between the period 15 December 2021 and the end of January 2022. This includes the options of the type of test that could be considered acceptable for this purpose and the options for how this testing should be funded.
2. This report discloses all relevant information and implications.

Summary

3. The Auckland boundary will formally lift at 11.59pm Tuesday 14 December 2021. Thereafter, and until 17 January 2022, those travelling out of Auckland who are not fully vaccinated will need to carry with them evidence of a negative test result within 72 hours of departure.
4. The different COVID-19 test options are PCR testing of a nasopharyngeal or oropharyngeal with bilateral nares swab sample, PCR testing of a saliva sample and rapid antigen testing (RAT).
5. Utilising PCR testing of a nasopharyngeal or oropharyngeal with bilateral nares swab sample for testing those travelling out of Auckland will place additional demands on the testing system, potentially negatively impacting on testing turnaround times including for symptomatic individuals.
6. Utilising a privately commissioned saliva testing provider or rapid antigen testing would not negatively impact on existing testing capacity. There are operational considerations including where testing would be carried out. Using both modalities would provide options for people and prevent additional pressure being placed on laboratories.
7. Currently, the Ministry funds testing of people who are symptomatic, are close contacts or are required to be tested under a COVID-19 Public Health Order for surveillance purposes. In practice, a significant proportion of asymptomatic testing that is not required under a Public Health Order is publicly funded. Some other surveillance testing is funded privately. The unit cost of testing varies depending on the type of testing with RAT being substantially cheaper than PCR testing.

8. The Ministry recommends that such testing should be publicly funded as the cost of testing required to travel out of Auckland would otherwise disproportionately impact on vulnerable populations, including Māori, given their lower rates of vaccination within the Auckland region.
9. Beyond this, it is also recommended that rapid antigen testing be publicly funded, throughout New Zealand, until the end of January to ensure testing is widely available during this period of time when people are travelling around the country.

Recommendations

We recommend you:

- a) **Agree** that testing for travellers leaving Auckland over the holiday period should not utilise Community Testing Centre or GP nasopharyngeal swabbing or saliva testing that will be analysed by existing laboratories as this would place additional pressure on them and could negatively impact on testing turnaround times, including for symptomatic people. Yes, No
- b) **Agree** that rapid antigen testing be utilised as the form of testing best suited for the purpose of testing unvaccinated travellers leaving Auckland between 15 December 2021 and the end of January 2022. Yes, No
- c) **Note** the Ministry has considered contracting a private provider to deliver a saliva PCR testing service for this purpose and concluded this is not the right approach, particularly given the potential for creating confusion for the public. Yes, No
- c) **Agree** that testing for those unvaccinated individuals travelling out of Auckland should be publicly funded until the end of January 2022. Yes, No
- d) **Agree** that rapid antigen testing for the purpose of providing proof of testing for domestic travel for unvaccinated travellers be publicly funded and free to access across New Zealand until the end of January 2022. Yes, No



Dr Ashley Bloomfield

Director-General of Health

Te Tumu Whakarae mō te Hauora

Date: 30 / 11 / 2021



Hon Chris Hipkins

Minister for COVID-19 Response

Date: 1/12/2021

Testing options for unvaccinated individuals travelling out of Auckland on or after 15 December

Background and context

1. It has been announced that the Auckland boundary will formally lift at 11.59pm Tuesday 14 December 2021. It has also been announced that, for the period from 15 December 2021 to 17 January 2022, those travelling out of Auckland will need to either be fully vaccinated or have a negative test result within 72 hours of departure.
2. It has not yet been confirmed what type or types of testing, of the several types available, will be accepted for this purpose, nor how these will be funded. This Health Report provides a range of options to address these two questions.
3. Confirmation of the type or types of testing that will be accepted for this purpose and how this will be funded will enable the sector to plan for the delivery of this testing and provide the public with additional information about what will be required of them.

Options for testing for unvaccinated travellers leaving Auckland

Those required to be tested

4. The lifting of the boundary will greatly increase the volume of travel across what is currently the Auckland Alert Level boundary, particularly as it occurs at a time of year in the run up to Christmas, that will prompt many to travel out of their home region.
5. It has been announced that fully vaccinated travellers leaving Auckland, those that have received their second doses, will not require testing before departure. Unvaccinated travellers over the age of 12 years 3 months, however, will need to carry with them proof of a negative test result within 72 hours of departure. This is expected to be enforced by spot checks to ensure compliance.
6. Based on data provided by the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Health estimates that (for a rate of 10% of those travelling not being fully vaccinated) the number of people travelling on any given day that will need to have a test result with them will be between 6,000 and 9,500. This number does not include any additional testing that could arise due to requirements imposed by Air New Zealand or for the inter-island ferries, for travel elsewhere in the country.
7. Currently those travelling out of Auckland for work or personal travel reasons must have an exemption to do so and must be tested. As of 26 November, the average number of tests done through the public testing systems for these purposes is approximately 3,600 per day. Therefore, we anticipate that testing for those crossing out of Auckland between 15 December 2021 and 17 January 2022 will increase by up to 5,900 tests per day.

Testing options

8. The different types of COVID-19 tests available are:
 - a. PCR testing of a nasopharyngeal or oropharyngeal with bilateral nares swab sample
 - b. PCR testing of a saliva sample
 - c. Rapid antigen testing – of which there are currently three different test kits that have been approved for use in New Zealand

PCR testing of a nasopharyngeal or oropharyngeal with bilateral nares swab sample

9. This option would involve sample collection at a General Practice (GP) or community testing centre (CTC) and processing of the sample in a laboratory. It would therefore add further demand to both systems.
10. The laboratory system is currently receiving more samples than it has capacity to process in a consistently timely fashion. On 26 November, 67 percent of tests were processed in under 24 hours against a benchmark of 80 percent. While laboratory capacity is being increased, additional demand will add further pressure and potentially increase turnaround times for symptomatic cases that return positive test results.
11. In addition, some tests performed for this purpose may not be able to be reported back within the 72-hour window.

PCR testing of a saliva sample

12. The saliva testing currently being carried out for border workers and people crossing the boundary involves self-collection of samples, meaning that this option is less likely to impact negatively on GP or CTC – and related laboratory – capacity.
13. Several of the laboratories in the national lab network are equipped for and experienced in analysing saliva samples. In addition, there are two private COVID-19 testing providers with labs in Auckland who undertake saliva testing and could be commissioned to deliver a service for this purpose. This would mean that the processing of these additional tests would not negatively impact on the laboratory network's existing activity.
14. Saliva testing has recently been recognised by the Ministry as a diagnostic test and so no further testing would be required to confirm a positive result. It has not yet been made available to the public yet and so a dedicated network of saliva collection points would need to be established. This could create confusion between community testing centres and these saliva collection points.

Rapid antigen testing (RATs)

15. Rapid antigen testing could be utilised, and this option would not add demand to the laboratory network. While rapid antigen testing is not considered to be diagnostic due to its lower sensitivity, it could be used appropriately in this situation with any positive or indeterminate result requiring a confirmatory PCR test.
16. Currently rapid antigen testing is being increasingly used for surveillance testing purposes, where multiple tests are taken over time (such as regular workplace-based testing for healthcare workers). It has been piloted as a screening test for patients and

visitors entering hospitals in Auckland, to provide a quick result while awaiting the result of a PCR test performed on a sample collected at the same time the rapid antigen test was performed.

17. The Ministry is currently undertaking a phased rollout of rapid antigen testing with phase three, involving making these tests available to the community, due to commence from 15 December.
18. The Ministry is also currently working on the necessary information systems changes required to capture the results of rapid antigen tests, which it aims to be operational by 15 December. A manually completed electronic form is also being developed as an interim measure. This will be able to be used for supervised rapid antigen testing, such as in a pharmacy, to provide a certified test result. The Ministry is already engaging with the pharmacy sector for a rollout of rapid antigen test community along these lines.

Preferred testing option

19. We recommend that rapid antigen testing, delivered through the pharmacy network, be the testing option used for unvaccinated people leaving Auckland. This is only for asymptomatic individuals, anyone showing symptoms should undergo a PCR test at a GP or CTC.
20. Using rapid antigen testing for this additional testing, will avoid a negative impact on our current lab capacity. With RATS being widely available through the Pharmacy network by Mid-December, this will provide a convenient process and can be done on the same day as travel. Having testing performed under supervision will help to ensure tests results are as reliable as possible. Indeterminate results would require a repeat rapid antigen test, positive results would then need to be confirmed by a PCR test.
21. Privately provided saliva testing has also been considered as an option that could avoid a negative impact on our current lab capacity. Tests would, however, still take about 10+ hours for results. The operational delivery would be complex, establishing a network of new saliva testing collection points to cover the Auckland region sufficiently. The public messaging would also potentially be confusing, with the risk that people will confuse the existing community testing centre for these saliva collection points, negating the purpose of moving testing away from these CTCs and the public lab network that processes the samples collected there.

Funding options

22. Currently testing is publicly funded for people who are symptomatic, are case contacts or are required to be tested under a COVID-19 Public Health Order (including border workers and those crossing the alert level boundary). In practice, a significant proportion of asymptomatic testing that is not required under a Public Health Order is publicly funded. Some other surveillance testing is funded privately. There is also some privately funded testing including pre-departure testing for international travel, which is paid for by the individual requesting the test, and some business sector testing for health and safety purposes that is funded by the business.
23. There are two options for funding of testing of people who travel out of Auckland on or after 15 December:

- a. Public funding, which is arguably justified as it is required as a public health measure, although there is not as yet a Health Order proposed that requires such testing.
- b. Testing should be privately funded by the individual or business initiating travel out of Auckland as travel by unvaccinated people is arguably discretionary and there is a clear publicly funded alternative (vaccination).

24. The approach to funding of this testing may have an impact on some individuals' decisions about getting vaccinated or getting their second vaccination in a timely way.

Costs of different testing options

25. s 9(2)(b)(ii) [Redacted]

- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]

26. [Redacted]

- [Redacted]
- [Redacted]

Equity

27. It is likely that testing requirements will disproportionately apply to Māori and Pacific Peoples and vulnerable groups with lower vaccination rates.

| | Full Vaccination Rate | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|----------------|---------|
| | Maori | Pacific People | Overall |
| Waitemata | 74% | 80% | 88% |
| Auckland Counties | 77% | 80% | 97% |
| Manukau | 67% | 78% | 85% |

28. A user pays approach to such testing would therefore also disproportionately impact on Māori and Pacific Peoples and vulnerable populations with lower vaccination rates.

Recommendations

29. The Ministry recommends that testing for travellers leaving Auckland over the holiday period should not utilise CTC and GP testing that will be analysed by public labs as this would negatively impact on other testing being carried out, including symptomatic testing, by increasing turnaround times.
30. Rapid antigen testing, delivered through the pharmacy network, is recommended as the best option for testing unvaccinated people leaving Auckland. This protects lab capacity and provides a testing option that is convenient for travellers, while supervision of testing within pharmacies adds to reliability.
31. Engaging a private saliva testing provider to deliver saliva testing at dedicated testing locations has also been considered. This is not the preferred option, however, as it would add additional cost, be operationally complicated to deliver and potentially confusing for the public.
32. On balance, the Ministry recommends that such testing should be publicly funded until the end of January 2022. This is considering that the Government is requiring this testing and the cost would otherwise disproportionately impact on vulnerable populations, including Māori, given their lower rates of vaccination within the Auckland region. It has also been considered that these are the population groups at greater risk of being infected in the current Auckland outbreak and any cost incurred could deter these groups from getting tested, which would be counterproductive.
33. To remove any potential barriers to testing, it is further recommended that rapid antigen testing for the purpose of meeting testing requirements for domestic travel for the unvaccinated should be free to access across New Zealand until the end of January 2022.

Next steps

34. Once you have confirmed what type or types of testing will be accepted for the purpose of leaving Auckland on or after 15 December, the Ministry will ensure that relevant partner agencies are informed and work with them to deliver this testing.
35. If you approve, in principle, that this testing will be publicly funded, the Ministry will model the projected costs for the period that testing will be required more comprehensively before seeking your final approval to incur these costs from the COVID-19 Response and Relief Fund.
36. The Ministry will update you weekly on progress with implementing this testing in the lead up to 15 December 2021.

ENDS.

PROACTIVELY RELEASED