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Extending support for the COVID-19 elimination strategy to June 2022

RT HON CHRIS HIPKINS(/MINISTER/RT-HON-CHRIS-HIPKINS)

COVID-19 Response

- Funding to support the COVID-19 health response and quarantine facilities for a further 18 months
- Money drawn down from the COVID-19 contingency fund
- Further improvements to health response administration and governance
- Lessons learned on surveillance and testing

The Government has set aside extra funding to support the health system's COVID-19 response and to maintain quarantine facilities up to June 2022, Minister for COVID-19 Response Chris Hipkins said today.

"We are committed to continuing our sustained approach of keeping COVID-19 out, preparing for it, and stamping it out, for as long as it takes, and have funded that for another 18 months if needed," Chris Hipkins said.

"As we move into 2021 there are exciting developments on the vaccine and safe travel zone fronts. But we also need our health system to have sufficient capacity and support to maintain effective levels of contact tracing and testing, and for managed isolation and quarantine facilities to be fully resourced for our overall elimination strategy to work.

"That requires cash injections for the Ministry of Health, DHBs and agencies working at the quarantine facilities to provide funding certainty."

Funding agreed by Cabinet will pay for a series of COVID-19-related health activities to June 2022, including:

- Maintaining up to 7000 tests a day including swabbing and laboratory services.
- Contact tracing, supplies of PPE and supporting technology.
- Additional support for the Ministry, and for DHBs on an as-needed basis.

The additional funding of $1.12 billion adds to the $251 million injection provided to health in October.

Further additional funding of $1.74 billion, split across the agencies involved, will ensure the MIQ operating model is fully resourced up to June 2022, including the costs of accommodation, transport, food, security and health and wellbeing services.

"These are significant investments that are critical to keeping our defences strong. Keeping COVID-19 out and quickly managing any incursions that do occur is an expensive business but it's the best investment we can make for our health and our economy," Chris Hipkins said.

"As well as continuing high levels of frontline delivery, the extra health funding will enable the Ministry to enhance its oversi
roles and other activities through a new COVID-19 Response Directorate and to continue to make improvements to the way
That includes a focus on improved Information Technology.

"New functions being developed include a greater role in research, more capacity to undertake infection, prevention and control audits and a beefed up policy and strategy unit," Chris Hipkins said.

Further improvements to the response administration and governance

"Throughout our response to COVID-19 so far, we've adopted a mind-set of driving constant review and improvement in the face of an unpredictable and fast evolving situation," Chris Hipkins said.

"The system of multiple interconnected agencies and portfolios is complex but has stood up well overall. Continual improvements have and continue to be made – but making substantial changes at the same time as focusing on keeping COVID-19 out has been a challenge.

"With much-improved testing, contact tracing and border control now in place however, the Government is in a position to consolidate and strengthen administration and governance of the response.

"This is increasingly essential to meet the added complexity of keeping New Zealanders safe, implementing the biggest immunisation programme in our history, while further stimulating the economy and managing a staged opening of our borders."

The updated approach, to be in place by March 2021, involves:

- Strategic leadership and central coordination to be led by a COVID-19 Response unit, building on existing all-of-government functions in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.
- The public health response, including strengthened surveillance and testing, and public health advice, to be managed by the Ministry of Health.
- End-to-end management of our borders, including links to MIQs, led by a Border Executive Board of interdepartmental chief executives.

Lessons learned and progress on surveillance, testing and contact tracing

In August, the Government established an Advisory Committee, chaired by Sir Brian Roche and Heather Simpson, to review testing and surveillance systems and propose improvements. This was followed in October by a review of contact tracing performance, also led by Sir Brian Roche.

"The reports are independent and between them contain 28 recommendations, of which 25 are for the Ministry of Health," Chris Hipkins said.

"Overall, the Committee found that by the time the reports were being written, the required improvements, including border testing, were under way.

"Cabinet has this week considered an update from the Ministry and other agencies on progress against the recommendations. Actions on five of the recommendations have been completed, with 23 underway.

"The Ministry has all year been at the heart of a massive response to a global pandemic that a year ago no-one could have foreseen," Chris Hipkins said.

"It has continued to improve and adapt its response to COVID-19, while delivering on its many other obligations. New Zealanders should have confidence in the containment of recent community cases to date as a result of a stronger Ministry response and the hard work of public health units," Chris Hipkins said.

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