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NEW ZEALAND / POLITICS

Plans under way for trans-Tasman bubble by end of April

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Government plans for a travel bubble between New Zealand and Australia are now in full swing - RNZ understands the plan is to have it in place by the end of April.

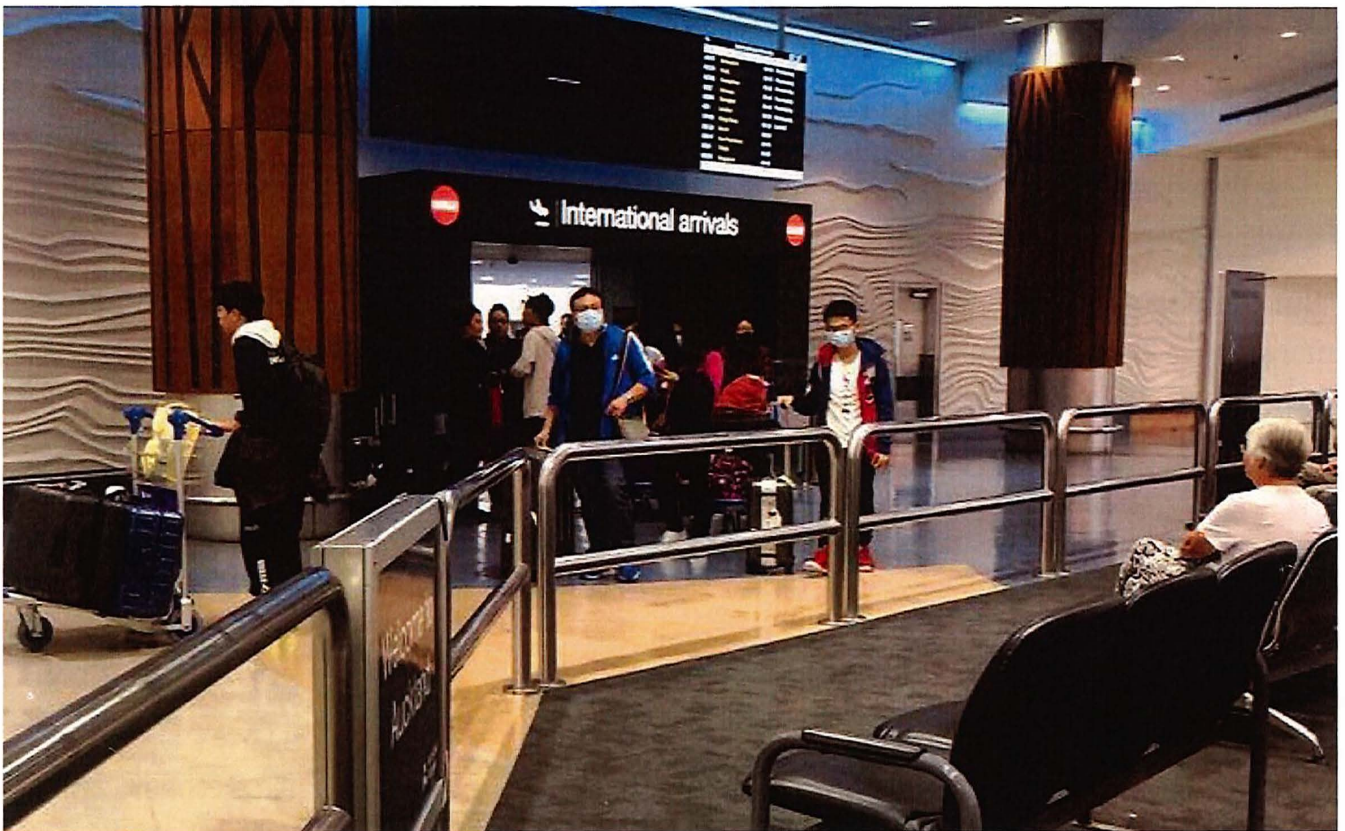


Photo: RNZ / Liu Chen

Ministers are actively working on the proposal and the next step would be for it to go to the full Cabinet, potentially this coming Monday.

That will be on the condition there are no community outbreaks of Covid-19 or lockdowns in the meantime.

There could also be an arrangement for safe travel zones with realm countries, the Cook Islands and Niue, which the government have long said would be a priority.

The door has already been partially opened, with New Zealand allowing passengers from the Cook Islands and more recently Niue to come here quarantine-free.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has said New Zealand would continue to work with both countries "for the resumption of two-way quarantine free travel".

Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown will visit here next week, the first leader New Zealand's hosted since last year's first lockdown.

National's Chris Bishop welcomed the news but questioned why it'll still take several more weeks.

The opposition party has ramped up the pressure this week, calling for the trans-Tasman bubble to **open up now**, to help the tourist industry and relieve pressure on managed isolation.

"It should have been in place already and it's frustrating that it has taken this long to get to this point," Bishop said.

"But there'll be many New Zealanders and Australians who are keen to come home and many Kiwis keen to go to Australia, families to be reunited and of course, tourism businesses will benefit from the bubble.

"So let's get on with it."

New Zealand's hand "has been forced", he believes, after Australia **backed out of talks in February**.

"So New Zealand has to act unilaterally in the same way that Australia has done towards New Zealand for quite some time.

"Australia has had open travel to New Zealanders, for the most part, since October last year; it's been frustrating to the Australians New Zealand did not return the favour.

"And now of course, the government is doing what we suggested which is that New Zealand open unilaterally and allow people in Australia to travel here quarantine free."

In keeping with the recent yachting action, ACT says "if there is a trans-Tasman travel bubble in place by April New Zealand will still have badly missed the lay line".

"Australia rounded the mark on 23 October last year when it launched a 'Framework for National Reopening' that allowed safe, controlled travel across State borders," ACT leader David Seymour said.

"New Zealand has had plenty of clear air to apply the same rules Australia did for its states to trans-Tasman travel, but unfortunately the crew in the Beehive simply couldn't make the boat go faster.

"As a result many New Zealand businesses are off their foils and in some cases are sinking completely."

Seymour said nothing will have changed in the risk profile of either country by April.

"How many businesses have closed and jobs have been unnecessarily lost because the New Zealand government didn't take on board the Australian framework and said 'there's really no reason we can't be part of this'?"

"This government doesn't deserve any thanks if it finally makes quarantine free two-way travel across the Tasman possible. It deserves to be pilloried for having been a needless obstruction to it happening for so long."

NZ 'not too far off' working out trans-Tasman bubble - Robertson

Earlier, Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson told *First Up* he was "very optimistic" the government can work out conditions for a travel bubble soon.



Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson. Photo: RNZ / Dom Thomas

Talks between the two countries have been going on for nine months, and Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins **said this week that officials had been close to reaching an agreement at the start of February**, but Australia decided it wanted to be able to make independent decisions.

Robertson said since then New Zealand had been working on the unilateral approach and the government was not "too far off" being able to create a New Zealand version.



"I don't think we're too far off being able to create the New Zealand version to match up with the Australian version" - Deputy PM Grant Robertson 8' 17"

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"There was plenty of discussions between New Zealand and Australia around how we could get a combined, joint, shared set of protocols and frameworks for quarantine free travel," Robertson told *First Up*.

"In the end, Australia went in a different direction and said 'right we think we can do it this way'. We've then taken that on board and said okay we're now working on what Minister Hipkins calls a unilateral approach.

"There's a few issues still to talk through, including what we do in the event there is an outbreak, how we manage people who aren't in their home country at that time.

"I'm very optimistic we'll sort that out in reasonably short order, and we can move towards having a unilateral bubble alongside the Australian unilateral bubble.

National Party leader Judith Collins has doubled down on her call for the trans-Tasman bubble to open immediately, saying it would be "**pretty easy**" to do and the government needed to find a way through, and help the tourist industry.

Hobbiton deputy chief executive Shayne Forrest said a travel bubble it would be a huge boost for the business.

"Pre Covid, Australia was our biggest single source market and accounted for about 20 percent of our numbers, so the idea of having access to our Australian friends to come and experience our little piece of Middle Earth is pretty exciting,

Forrest hopes the bubble can come in soon, and he would like more communication on the process and a time frame, but said he was happy to wait until it was safe.

"We wouldn't want to lose that position of the gains we've made, and [being] able to live a pretty normal life here."

Robertson said Australia had its situation sorted to its satisfaction, and New Zealand could look at that as it worked out its version.

"We were working towards a joint framework a joint set of protocols, but actually I don't think we're too far off being able to create the New Zealand version to match up with the Australian version."



Public opinion on a travel bubble is mixed - Listen to a report from Kate Gregan 3' 46"
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In Parliament on Tuesday, Hipkins detailed what officials were working through.

They included "understanding the circumstances that could lead to a suspension of green zone travel on either side of the Tasman; what we would do with those whose travel is disrupted by the suspension of a green zone; testing requirements that may be put in place on either side; Australia's current exit visa restriction that prevents Australians travelling

to New Zealand without a visa; the state-by-state differences in decision making in Australia; decision making around expansion to other countries outside of the safe travel zone and who would make those, and whether New Zealand would have any input into that process; and contact tracing system interoperability, in the event that we needed to do contact tracing for people who had been in one country, and were then identified as being more at risk after they had travelled to another country."

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