

[NEW ZEALAND \(/NEWS/NATIONAL\)](#) / [POLITICS \(/NEWS/POLITICAL\)](#)

Questions about coalition's Covid-19 vaccine mandate pledge

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Questions have been asked over what the coalition means when it says it will end Covid-19 vaccine mandates, which were scrapped by the previous government in 2022. Photo: AFP.com - RNZ / Composite image RNZ

The coalition is still trying to work out how it will meet its pledge to end all Covid-19 vaccine mandates, given the government mandates were scrapped more than 1.5 years ago.

New Zealand First secured the commitment during negotiations

<https://www.nzfirst.nz/coalition-agreement>) to form a government last year and leader

Winston Peters hailed the policy win during his state-of-the-nation speech

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/511947/winston-peters-delivers-state-of-the-nation-speech>), in March.

That's despite Labour having already axed all government vaccine mandates in September 2022 (<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/474615/covid-19-traffic-light-system-vaccine-mandates-and-most-mask-requirements-to-end>).

Asked what additional actions were required to fulfil the promise, a spokesperson for NZ First told RNZ: "our team is still working through the details".

The prime minister's office referred questions to Minister of Health Shane Reti, who has been delegated responsibility.

A spokesperson for Reti said: "No decisions have yet been made on what further steps are required to satisfy that commitment."

'What was exactly meant by that?'

Speaking to RNZ, Reti said the mandate work was not on "an active schedule", but he had discussed it with officials.

He conceded that "technically" all Covid-19 mandates had already ended, but he pointed out some vaccine requirements continued at individual organisations under workplace health and safety policies.

Reti said those arrangements were "a little different than a nationwide legislative mandate" and Cabinet still needed to discuss whether its commitment stretched to cover them too.

"What was exactly meant by that [coalition agreement]? Was it also meant [to cover] the workplace mandates as well?" he said.

"There'll be some discussions and decisions that we'll take to Cabinet and figure our way through."

It is not clear how many organisations currently have workplace agreements relating to the Covid-19 vaccine. Asked whether the coalition would intervene in private businesses' decisions, Reti said the government would "at this point... leave it to them."

At Health New Zealand, also known as Te Whatu Ora, workers deemed to be at high-risk of Covid-19 exposure are "expected" to be fully vaccinated. Those who are not vaccinated could be restricted from carrying out certain tasks or be required to take other precautions.

Te Whatu Ora health and safety head Sue Gordon told RNZ the agency wanted to protect people from catching Covid-19 while in hospitals and healthcare facilities.

"We take a risk-based approach to non-vaccinated staff and work with them on a case-by-case basis," she said.

A Health NZ spokesperson said officials had not provided any recent advice to the government on the vaccine mandate pledge. The same is true of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

Emails, obtained under the Official Information Act, show health ministry staff sent some information about mandates to Reti's office in February.

That included confirmation that vaccine mandates had been "progressively removed from April 2022, with the last mandates - including for healthcare workers - ending in September 2022."

'Very strange'

Labour health spokesperson Ayesha Verrall told RNZ the coalition's commitment was "slightly odd" and appeared little more than a sop to conspiracy theorists.

"I'm aware parts of the coalition got a lot of support from people who were anti-Covid-mandates, but those have really well-and-truly been disestablished."

Verrall said individual health and safety vaccine policies had existed "well before Covid" and it would be government overreach to intervene at that level.

"Health employers of course vaccinate people for Hepatitis B. Workers in sewerage get vaccinated for Hepatitis A. This is not an unusual type of requirement.

"[It would] be very strange if they decided to [intervene] just about Covid but not about other hazards that workers face in the workplace."

Reti denied that the coalition had included the commitment simply to appease conspiracy theorists. NZ First has also been approached for a response.

Cabinet has also yet to decide how it will expand the scope of the Covid-19 inquiry currently underway, another commitment agreed to during coalition negotiations.

Minister of Internal Affairs Brooke van Velden said the government was "currently working through a range of options" regarding the inquiry and would make clear decisions before the end of June.