



## Proactive Release

The following document has been proactively released by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), on behalf of Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister for COVID-19 Response:

### Reconnecting New Zealanders Further changes to international border settings

The following documents have been included in this release:

**Title of paper:** Reconnecting New Zealanders: Further Changes to International Border Settings (SWC-22-SUB-0033 refers)

**Title of minute:** Reconnecting New Zealanders: Further Changes to International Border Settings (SWC-22-MIN-0033 refers)

**Title of minute:** Reconnecting New Zealanders: Further Changes to International Border Settings (CAB-22-MIN-0072 refers)

Some parts of this information release would not be appropriate to release and, if requested, would be withheld under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act). Where this is the case, the relevant section of the Act that would apply has been identified. Where information has been withheld, no public interest has been identified that would outweigh the reasons for withholding it.

### Key to redaction codes:

6(a) to prejudice the security or defence of New Zealand or the international relations of the Government of New Zealand;

6(b) to prejudice the entrusting of information to the Government of New Zealand on a basis of confidence by the Government of any other country or any agency of such a Government;

9(2)(b)(ii) to protect information where the making available of the information would be likely unreasonably to prejudice the commercial position of the person who supplied or who is the subject of the information;

9(2)(f)(iv) maintain the confidentiality of advice tendered by Ministers of the Crown and officials; and

9(2)(h) to maintain legal professional privilege.

- 10.1 for New Zealanders and other travellers under current immigration settings arriving from Australia – from 11.59pm Wednesday 2 March (Step 1);
- P. 10.2 for New Zealanders and other travellers under current immigration settings arriving from other countries – no later than 11.59pm Friday 4 March (brought forward from Step 2, 11.59pm Sunday 13 March); and
- 10.3 for other travellers not currently eligible to enter under immigration settings – in accordance with previous decisions on the timing of Steps, with further advice to be provided on the timing of Steps 3 and 4 [CAB-22-MIN-0050].
- 11 Cabinet also noted advice from the Director-General of Health that continuing to require unvaccinated New Zealand citizens to enter MIQ is no longer justified on the basis of reducing outbreak size or containing transmission, but there are risks with this approach so further consideration is needed.

### Requirements for arrivals who do not meet the ‘fully vaccinated’ definition

- 12 Under existing settings, arrivals who do not meet the definition of ‘fully vaccinated’ are required to enter MIQ for a seven-day period. Arrivals who do not meet this definition may include:
- 12.1 **unvaccinated arrivals** (limited to New Zealand citizens and other groups who are exempt from the minimum vaccination requirements for entry to New Zealand by air, such as those aged 16 years and under, refugees, people evacuated from Afghanistan, and those who have a certificate from a health practitioner confirming they cannot be vaccinated against COVID-19 due to medical reasons); and
- 12.2 **minimally vaccinated arrivals**<sup>2</sup> (those who meet the minimum vaccination requirements for entry to New Zealand by air but who do not meet the definition of ‘fully vaccinated’).
- 13 I have considered updated advice from the Ministry of Health on the approach to these arrivals. It states there is no strong public health rationale to manage arrivals who are not ‘fully vaccinated’ differently from those who are by requiring them to enter MIQ. The advice is informed by the assessment that detaining these arrivals in MIQ would have minimal impact on reducing the current outbreak or containing transmission. Unvaccinated people have a higher risk of hospitalisation, but the risk of that is the same whether they are in MIQ or the community.
- 14 The advice is also informed by the expected scale of the risk. Most arrivals are currently required to obtain a negative pre-departure test prior to boarding, which includes either a RAT or LAMP test within 24 hours or a PCR test within 48 hours of

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<sup>2</sup> Policy settings in place since 1 November 2021 require non-New Zealand citizens arriving by air to have a complete primary course (or a combination of) any of the COVID-19 vaccines that have been approved by at least one government health authority or approval authority. These are known as the ‘minimum vaccination requirements’. Requirements to meet the definition of ‘fully vaccinated’ are tighter, based on WHO EUL approved vaccines which are required to have an efficacy of 50% or above.

come into MIQ instead. This clause was not replicated to apply to travellers that are not required to isolate.

- 33 I propose that this provision is updated to apply to anyone that is otherwise not required to go to MIQ. The provision is intended to be temporary and for MBIE to allow specific groups of travellers to voluntarily come into MIQ, while further arrangements are made to accommodate those groups. These groups include Afghanistan returnees and refugees, who use MIQ prior to moving to resettlement centres, and Pacific Island maritime crew, who use MIQ prior to travelling to Pacific countries. I understand it would take time for other non-MIQ solutions to be set up.
- 34 Without a provision in the COVID-19 Public Health Response (Air Border) Order 2021, MBIE can only allow people into MIQ using individual contracting arrangements. These complex contracts will be cumbersome to set up and administer and may be difficult for some travellers to understand.
- 35 MBIE is considering the ongoing role of MIQ for Afghanistan returnees and refugees, and Pacific Island crews, and will provide me with further advice in the week of 14 March.

*Future changes in risk*

- 36 The Ministry of Health will continue to monitor the risk associated with international arrivals, including those who are unvaccinated. In the event that the risk profile of arrivals increases such that additional risk mitigations are recommended by public health, consideration would be given to reinstating measures, subject to assessment of economic and social factors, and operational considerations such as lead-in times. The rationale for any tightening of measures would need to be communicated clearly to support compliance and social licence.
- 37 The Ministry of Health advises that reinstatement of an MIQ requirement would be unlikely and recommended only in the event of a significant change in public health risk, such as a new COVID-19 variant being more significantly vaccine resistant, more transmissible and more virulent. The pace at which an MIQ requirement could be reinstated would depend on timing and workforce availability. If requirements were reinstated prior to 30 June 2022, facilities may be available but time would be required to re-scale the workforce. If requirements were reinstated after facilities have been released to market, re-scaling would require significant time and renegotiation with hotels.
- 38 In addition, reinstatement of an MIQ requirement would be highly disruptive, including to the aviation sector.
- 39 A self-isolation requirement could be implemented at shorter notice, but some lead-in time would be required for the necessary amendments to Orders and to ensure processes at the border (including any changes to testing requirements) are in place.

**Updating the timing of the Steps**

- P. 40 In light of the early commencement of Step 2 for New Zealand citizens, permanent residents and other currently eligible travellers, I have considered whether reopening

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further categories could be brought forward. Immigration system considerations for early commencement of Steps 1 – 5 are summarised in Appendix 1.

- 41 No changes are proposed for the timing of the remainder of Step 2, which includes opening visa applications for critical workers earning 1.5 times the median wage and Working Holiday Scheme visas from 11.59pm Sunday 13 March.
- 42 In addition, I do not propose any changes to the timing of Step 3 from 11.59pm Tuesday 12 April, which currently includes class exceptions for 5,000 students and up to 250 Pacific Manaaki scholars [CAB-22-MIN-008], along with existing holders of valid work and student visas (both onshore and offshore) [CAB-22-MIN-008 and CAB-22-MIN-0018]. This timing allows for a short interval between the NZTD's go-live date of Thursday 31 March and an anticipated boost in international travellers.

*Consideration can be given to bringing forward categories of travellers in Step 4*

- 43 Step 4 (by July) currently includes the following categories:
- 43.1 Australian citizens and permanent residents arriving from anywhere in the world<sup>6</sup>;
  - 43.2 visa-waiver travellers;
  - 43.3 existing holders of valid visitor visas (both onshore and offshore).
- 44 Consideration can be given to bringing forward the above categories, to enable earlier realisation of social and economic benefits from reopening. This needs to be balanced against potential impacts on the trajectory of the Omicron outbreak and health system capacity.

*Outbreak trajectory and health system capacity*

- 45 The visa categories included in Step 4, in particular Australians and visa-waiver travellers, comprise a significant volume of arrivals. It is difficult to estimate the increase in traveller volumes to New Zealand from opening these categories, due to the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on international aviation patterns and people's ability to travel across international borders.
- 46 Border agencies have previously estimated that reopening to the proposed categories could result in 13,000 Australians and 23,000 visa-waiver travellers arriving weekly, based on 65 percent of annual arrivals in 2019.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there are around 570,000 individuals offshore with valid visitor visas who could enter. However, a number of comparable countries are seeing significantly lower recovery of short-term travel volumes after relaxing border settings, and information from the aviation industry

<sup>6</sup> For the avoidance of doubt, travellers from Australia who need a visa will not be eligible to enter New Zealand until the visa category they wish to enter under opens for offshore applications, unless they are travelling with a partner who is a New Zealand citizen. This means Australia cannot be used as a 'backdoor' entry point for visa-required travellers who otherwise would not be permitted to enter New Zealand.

<sup>7</sup> Estimates have not been updated to account for the removal of self-isolation requirement for fully vaccinated arrivals, owing to the high degree of uncertainty around overall volumes.