



DPMC, 2021



COVID-19 media conference — 1 September 2021

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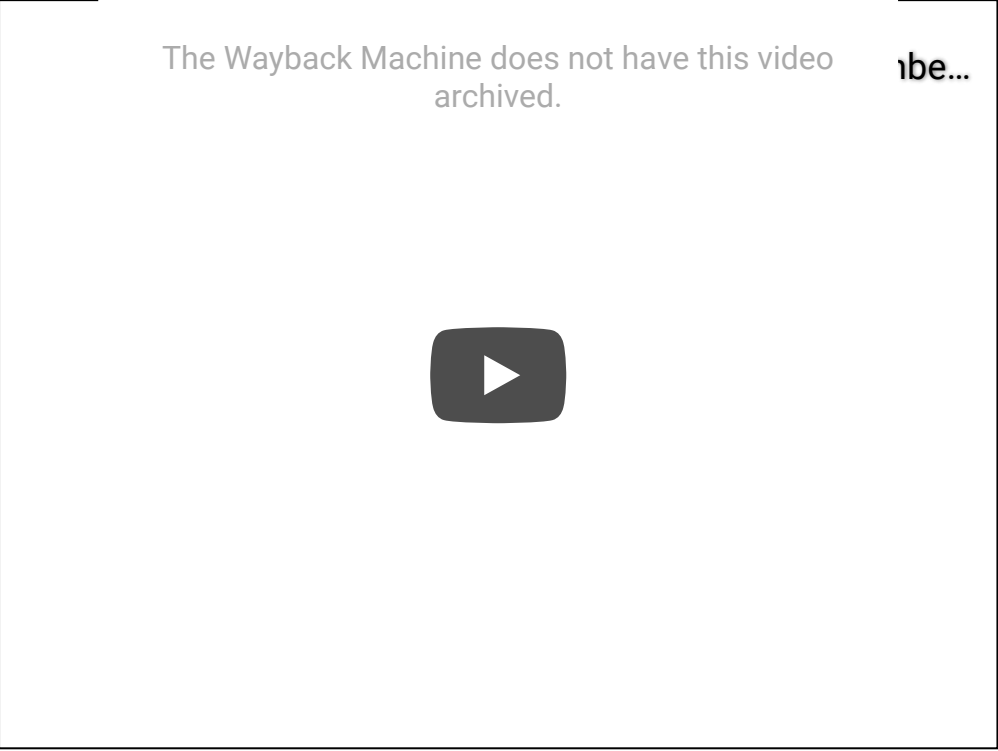
Media conference

The COVID-19 media conference starts at 1pm.

Speakers:

- Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern
- Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield

You can watch the livestream here.



Video transcript: COVID-19 media conference — 1 September 2021

Hon Chris Hipkins: Kia ora koutou katoa. Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome. I'll start with a quick update on the alert level 4/level 3 border around Auckland. We've had reports from police that they're seeing very good compliance. Most people have the correct documentation with them when they have been stopped. I understand that a very small number of people have been turned around. Police are going to be providing an update on numbers later on today or early tomorrow. The number of companies that have been issued with travel documentation to move across the boundaries is more than 3,300. That covers 23,500 employees.

On flooding, for those in West Auckland who are cleaning up, we understand that this must be a particularly stressful time, and so I would like to remind those who have been affected that there are ways for them to keep themselves safe under alert level 4. Some may have had to breach their bubble due to the emergency situation they faced, but we encourage them to continue trying to keep physical distance wherever possible, follow basic hygiene measures that we all know can reduce the spread of COVID-19. Under alert level 4, plumbers, electricians, locksmiths, and other tradespeople can carry out work that is required to address immediate risks to health and safety, as long as they are continuing to follow public health measures and they're wearing appropriate PPE.

A brief word on vaccines before I hand over to the director-general. I will have more to say on vaccines after he's given the vaccine update. But I want to note, on this first day of Spring, that we are also recognising a milestone for the vaccine programme, with all New Zealanders over the age of 12 now eligible to book in to get their vaccine, regardless of their age, where they live, which group they belong to, or any other factors, such as occupation and so on. This is a big step forward in our work to protect New Zealanders from COVID-19, and I do encourage people to take up the opportunity to make their bookings so that they can get their vaccines. I'll now hand over to the director-general. I've then got a few words on vaccines and a couple of other issues, and then we'll open up for questions.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Thank you, Minister. Kia ora koutou katoa. So, today, there are 75 new cases of COVID-19 in the community that are part of the Auckland outbreak. All but one are in Auckland. There's also one other case under investigation that is almost certainly an historic case that is not related at all to the community outbreak. However, the other case that is not in Auckland today is in Wellington. It is a household contact of an existing case, and this person has been in isolation since 24 August. Of note with this case is that the person had returned three previous negative tests before returning a positive test and remains asymptomatic. This emphasises the importance of anyone who is a close contact or a very close contact seeing that 14-day period through and having that day 12 test.

Now, this latest bounce in numbers is not unexpected. We did see this last April, when our numbers went from 89 on 2 April to 71 the next day, then 89 again on the 5th, and then 67 the following day, then continued to fall. I've actually got a visual aid today—sorry, not in A3; only A4-sized visual aids today. But you can see how that bounced around. In fact, one of the numbers was 53 one day, before it bounced back up. So, if we look at the smoothing of the average over the last three days, it is clear that, on average, the daily case numbers are lower than the peak in the early 80s, but, of course, we will be watching carefully.

Now, of note, just thinking about the cases we reported yesterday, there were 49. Fifty-seven percent of those were household contacts of an existing case, similar to the day before, rather than from exposures in the community, and 75 percent did not create any exposure events, similar to the proportion the day before, which was 77 percent. So that implies they've been isolating since lockdown or since being identified as a contact. So therefore, as I said, of the cases we reported yesterday, just 25 percent were considered to have been infectious in the community in the time before they were diagnosed.

Furthermore, moving to the reproductive rate—the R value—based on the latest modelling, that continues to be promising, and there's a 90 percent probability that remains under one with the numbers coming through over the last few days, indicating that the number of cases will continue to decline and we are successfully breaking the chains of transmission.

We are looking at the cases today just to work out what proportion of these are expected cases from testing of close contacts, in particular those that are day 12 tests from either household contacts or people who we knew about from a location of interest. As of this morning, there are 32 people in hospital. They're all in Auckland hospitals, after the one patient who was in Wellington Regional Hospital was discharged yesterday back to a quarantine facility. Of those in hospital, eight are in

hospital was discharged yesterday back to a quarantine facility. Of those in hospital, eight are in intensive care and three are currently ventilated.

Another big day for testing yesterday, with 22,158 tests processed nationwide. Demand for testing in Auckland remains strong, with around 6,500 swabs yesterday across the metro Auckland region. A reminder, anyone, wherever you are in the country, if you have symptoms that could be COVID-19, isolate within your bubble and get a test.

On the waste-water testing result front, the latest results from ESR show no unexpected detections to report, and a sample collected from Moa Point here in Wellington on Monday has returned a negative result for the first time since 19 August. COVID-19 was also not detected in a sample collected on Monday from the broader Christchurch waste-water treatment plant. And, while COVID-19 continues to be detected at a number of locations across Tāmaki-makau-rau, for the first time since 18 August it was not detected in a sample taken from the western Auckland network. Samples were collected from a number of locations in Northland yesterday, and those results are expected tomorrow as part of informing that final confirmation that Northland will be able to move to alert level 3 at 2359 tomorrow.

District health boards around the country nationwide have been impacted by alert level 4, and this has created particular pressures on the three Auckland metro DHBs. We are working with our district health boards across the country to support the Auckland DHBs with additional staff, and I'd like to thank everybody who has answered the call there. That includes a number of additional staff to help the front-line response in hospitals, as well as in the new quarantine facilities that have been stood up there; includes nursing staff in the hospitals, healthcare assistants, and ICU specialist nurses, as well. I do want to stress: all hospitals around the country are open and able to provide acute care for any condition, and people should seek care as soon as they need it.

Moving on to locations of interest. Out of an abundance of caution and after some discussion internally, we've decided to add a number of supermarkets as new locations of interest. So around 40 supermarkets across Auckland will be added to the website today. These are places that were visited by people who subsequently were identified as a case. A risk assessment has been done on each of them, and due to physical distancing in place, the plastic screens, PPE use, and so on, the events are deemed to be low risk, but people should look out, and if anyone has been in one of these, even if that was some time ago, the advice is just to be careful, watch for symptoms since you have been there, if you were there at the time and place that is indicated on the website. So no need to go and get a test, but just for awareness.

And, finally today, I'd like to give a shout-out to all the workers in our diagnostic medical labs throughout Aotearoa. Yesterday, they processed their 3 millionth nasopharyngeal COVID-19 PCR test since the start of the pandemic: an amazing achievement, and absolutely fundamental to the success of New Zealand's elimination strategy to date. Thank you, Minister.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Thank you, Dr Bloomfield. A few words on vaccines. As of 11.59 p.m. last night, 3.5 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine have been administered in New Zealand. I do want to acknowledge that the rate of vaccination in New Zealand has stepped up significantly since mid-July, when we started receiving bigger deliveries of vaccine in New Zealand. We've increased the number of doses administered from around 190,000 per week to around 540,000 per week, an increase of 184 percent, just in the last couple of weeks; 2,290,000 people have now had at least one dose of the vaccine. That's around 54 percent of the eligible population aged 12 years and over. That means around half of the eligible population have received at least one dose of the vaccine, which is a significant milestone. Of those, 1,200,000 are fully vaccinated with two doses, almost a third of the eligible population.

Older New Zealanders are showing the way, and I want to acknowledge that. We did start with older New Zealanders first in our general population roll-out. More than 85 percent of people aged 65-plus have now been vaccinated with at least one dose. Using our older Kiwis as an example, that does pose a challenge to younger generations to come forward and receive your vaccinations at, at least, the equivalent rate of that.

We do still have a challenge around ethnicity and around ensuring we're reaching into all of our communities. Around 37 percent of the Māori population have had at least one dose of the vaccine, and around 47 percent of the Pacific population have had at least one dose of the vaccine. In terms of full vaccination, the rates sit at around 19 percent for Māori and around 26 percent for Pasifika. That suggests that we still have an ethnicity challenge, although I want to acknowledge that, for both of those communities, the age profile is younger, so they would have been underrepresented in some of the older age groups.

We have seen bookings surge in recent times, as New Zealanders take up the opportunity to book in for their vaccine. The highest date on record so far was 25 August, when more than quarter of a million people booked their appointments. We expect to see another surge in coming days as that larger population group is able to book in. There are around 1.9 million future bookings in Book My Vaccine. Some people might ask why we talk so much about future vaccines. It's important because it recognises the commitment that New Zealanders are making to play their part in the vaccination campaign.

Sixty-eight percent of New Zealanders in the 12-plus age bracket are either booked or have had a vaccination. That number's come down a little bit in recent days because we've just added the latest population cohort in there. If you look at older age groups, it's actually 79 percent of the New Zealanders aged 30-plus who have either booked or have had a vaccine. That suggests that New Zealand's on track to achieve a good, high rate of vaccinations, because we know that not everybody will have yet booked in. And so I encourage people to make sure that they are booking in. Eighty-three percent of those aged over 40 have either booked in or have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

So thank you to New Zealanders for coming forward, making your bookings, and getting your vaccine. That is really important in our fight against COVID-19, and I encourage everybody to take up the opportunity. Vaccinations are one of the most powerful tools we have against COVID-19. They are completely free and they are safe. The highest possible uptake is the best way for us to get back to a greater sense of normality, and then, of course, stay there. So people should reserve their spot at bookmyvaccine.nz. If they've got questions or they need help making a booking, they can call the Vaccination Healthline 0800 28 29 26.

A few words on managed isolation. I do want to acknowledge that the pressure that our managed isolation system has been under in recent weeks. MIQ is one of our key lines of defence to keep COVID-19 out of our community, and they've done an incredible job of that. Over 168,000 New Zealanders have come back into the country through our MIQ facilities very safely, with very few incidents, and I want to acknowledge the dedication of the team who are running those facilities.

We do have a current challenge in accommodating those positive cases in our community and those who cannot isolate safely at home. As a result of that, we are in the process of repurposing two further facilities to use for quarantine and for isolation of community cases, in addition to the Jet Park, which has been the mainstay of our efforts in that area so far. That is putting further pressure on the network.

We also have further investigations being done, and I'm expecting to receive the results of those in the next 24, of the Crowne Plaza to ensure that we have isolated any risk there before anyone further is put into the Crowne Plaza for isolation purposes. It has been a really important part of our MIQ network, and I do want to acknowledge that, and we're making sure that we have that facility as tight as possible before we put anyone further into it.

All of this means it's unavoidable that, for now, we have had to extend the pause on releasing any further MIQ vouchers for a few more weeks to ease pressure on the system. That means that there are no vouchers available to be booked through the voucher website at the moment. I acknowledge that that is not easy for New Zealanders abroad who are looking to come home. We do need to be able to isolate current COVID-19 cases in the community, and their close contacts, safely in order to bring the entire of New Zealand back to a greater sense of normality as quickly as possible. That has to be our priority, and that is one of the reasons why we're asking Kiwis abroad to play their part in this response by being patient. I acknowledge that that is a very challenging thing to ask of them. I do want to stress that the pause on releasing further vouchers does not pause emergency allocations. New Zealanders who are in desperate need to come home urgently can still make an application for an emergency allocation. We are working to defer, where we can, group bookings coming in, and that includes deferring some of the regional seasonal employment workers who were due to be coming in over the course of this coming month, so that we can again further ease pressure on our MIQ system.

When we do release the next range of vouchers, and I hope to have more to say on that in the next week or two, people will note that the booking system will operate differently to the way that it has operated previously. When we release large numbers of vouchers, large room releases, we will be foreshadowing that in advance of the vouchers being released, and we will be introducing a virtual lobby booking system. The lobby is a virtual queue. It will mean that people can be selected from the queue randomly, removing the need for people to be the fastest person to hit the button. It will not fix the overall issue of supply and demand. We still have more demand than we have supply available, and in periods of high demand it is still going to be the case that we won't have rooms for everybody that wants to come home. But this change will make bookings more transparent and easier for people, and it will create a more level playing field for people once they're on the website. Once all the

people, and it will create a more level playing field for people once they're on the website. Once all the rooms have been taken, the lobby will be closed and anybody in the queue will be informed that they have, unfortunately, missed out this time. We will then continue to announce large room releases so that people will know when to come back, and we will look to use the virtual lobby again, taking on board any lessons that we have to learn from the first use of the lobby, which will be the next significant booking release. And I hope to have more to say on the timing of that release as soon as I can, but, as I've indicated, there won't be any vouchers released in the next week or two.

Media: Thank you. Is extending this pause legal? Are you breaching people's basic human rights by not allowing them to come home, and could you have avoided this as well with some purpose-built managed isolation facilities?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, I don't want to get into the legal advice that we get given. But what I would say is, in terms of balancing human rights and people's rights to return to New Zealand, and all of the other decisions that we make that have a limitation on people's rights, the overriding legal principle that comes into play here is that the restrictions put in place have to be proportionate to the level of risk. At the moment, we are clearly dealing with an elevated level of risk, which is why we have, at this point, had to institute further restrictions than we would normally have.

Media: Is your message today that Kiwis won't be able to come home for Christmas?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, we will have further vouchers to release before the end of the year, so there will be more opportunity for people to come back before the end of the year, but, clearly, there is a lot of demand. So those who were hoping to have a summer holiday in New Zealand, my request of them is to leave the vouchers, to leave the room availability, to those who really need to come home and who are coming home for good. Now is not a good time to come home for a holiday with the intention of returning back to where you are. We do need you to play your part by allowing those vouchers to be available for those in the greatest need.

Media: Phil Goff's been calling for vaccines to be prioritised for Auckland. Is that something you're considering?

Hon Chris Hipkins: A big focus on vaccination over the last couple of weeks has been in Auckland, making sure that we are ramping up our deliveries in Auckland, and you've seen a big scale-up in the vaccine programme across Auckland, and a great number of Aucklanders coming forward to get their vaccines. As we look to the next few weeks, in making sure that we are using the doses available to us as best as possible, I can absolutely provide a reassurance that Auckland is front of our thinking in that. They will be a priority—they are a priority now and they will continue to be a priority.

Media: Just to Dr Bloomfield, please, has there been a significant enough increase in the vaccination rates of Māori and Pasifika communities? Are you happy with how things are tracking?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Look, I've been pleased to see that the rates of vaccination in Māori and Pacific have doubled over the last couple of weeks, on a day-to-day basis. So I think that's a great sign, and there's additional funding going out to Māori and Pacific providers to support some of those new initiatives that we've seen stand up over the last couple of weeks. So it's important, and it's a huge focus for our team.

Media: If you do prioritise Auckland over the next couple of weeks as the supplies get a bit lower, will you have to slow things down around the country? How will that work?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, we are—I think it's been well signalled—looking at seeing whether there are things that we can do to increase the supply over the next few weeks until we get the very large deliveries that we're expecting in October.

[cont: If we're in a position to—well, we will be in a position to provide greater clarity]

If we're in a position to—well, we will be in a position to provide greater clarity on that before the end of the week, and we will certainly do that as soon as we're in a position to do that. In the worst-case scenario where we can't increase supply, use of the existing supply we have will be focused certainly on Auckland, also on making sure that we can honour people who have booked in. It may mean that things like walk-in clinics, for example, around the rest of the country might need to be scaled back a bit. We'll work through that. Obviously, the longer we go at these higher rates, then the more restricted we'll be if we can't get additional supplies in by the middle of the month. But look, we should have greater clarity on that in the next few days, and by the end of the week we should be able to provide more of an update on that.

Media: Yesterday, Stuff ran a story about a student in Auckland who flew down to Dunedin during level 4. Today, another, not another story about another student who flew from Auckland to Wellington.

level 4. Today, we've got another story about another student who flew from Auckland to Wellington and returned to their hall of residence. What do people actually do, or what are they supposed to actually do to be able to get on a flight in Auckland to go elsewhere in the country?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yeah, I'll look again at that. They should be being checked at the airport. They should be being checked before they can even get into the airport terminal. Previous level 4 restrictions—and I just want to check to make sure that this is absolutely operating as it has previously—have had people at the door of the airport terminal checking why people are entering the terminal before they can even get anywhere near the plane. So I will go back and check that that's happening. This is disappointing. These people should not be travelling. There will potentially be consequences for them for breaking the rules. Obviously, I don't make the decisions around individual infringements, but there are infringements that can be applied to people who have knowingly broken the rules. No one in these situations that we're talking about, with students returning to their halls of residence—they should not be doing that while the place that they are currently at is at level 4.

Media: How worrying is this, given that Auckland's border really is the thing that's the protector of the rest of the country, that is now in level 3 and, hopefully, coming down further in—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, at this point I don't have information about what information they supplied when they went to the airport in order to be able to get on a plane and leave Auckland. And so, until that information has been assembled, I'm just being very cautious in making a conclusion about whether or not that system is robust.

Media: What sort of information would that have to be? Would it have to be like a letter from the employer that you're an essential worker? I mean, what—

Hon Chris Hipkins: They would have had to demonstrate, if the system is working as it should—and, again, we will check that it is working as it should. They would have had to demonstrate that they were eligible to travel, before they were able to get on the plane, and everybody can access—there's a range of criteria that makes someone eligible to travel. They would have had to demonstrate that before they should have been allowed into the terminal to then get on the plane.

Media: Will you look at treating Auckland, while it's in level 4 and the rest of the country is at a different level, like you did Australia—introduce pre-departure tests so that anyone coming out of there is definitely COVID-free?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, we haven't made that decision at this point and there would be some logistical barriers to doing that. What we are working on is a more rapid and regular form of testing for those who are having to travel across the border—so, for example, truck drivers who are moving across the border; we are working with the transport and logistics industry to make tests more readily available for all those who are doing that and doing everything we can to minimise that risk. There is still some movement across the border, as I indicated before. We've got 33,500 employees who are authorised on a regular basis to travel across the border at the moment. So we're talking about reasonably significant numbers relative to the numbers of people coming into the country from abroad but we keep all of that under regular review.

Media: What about this example here of someone flying into—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Like I said, I haven't got the information on—*[Interruption]* I haven't had the information on the checks that were done at the airport. That is one of the things that the team will be looking very closely at.

Media: People overseas are already expressing their frustration in this pause of the MIQ voucher system. Is this something that the Government should have fixed a long time ago, the whole system? Because there's been stress in the system for a while. And the second part to the question is did you seek Crown Law advice over this decision?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, I get Crown Law advice regularly. Representatives of Crown Law are in all of the meetings where I'm being asked to make decisions around this. As the person who has to sign the order, of course, I'm getting regular legal advice on that, but, as is longstanding convention, I don't share that legal advice publicly.

In terms of the message to New Zealanders who are abroad and frustrated by this, I do want to acknowledge this: we're in a global pandemic that has made international travel much, much more difficult. It has made it much, much more restrictive and much, much more limited. There are a lot of people around the globe who are affected by that at the moment and we are doing what we can do and we're doing what we can do safely.

There are limitations to the number of people that we can bring in through MIQ. There is not an infinite ability to stand up more MIQ. We're looking at whether we can, and we've got conversations happening about that at the moment, and you'll see some resistance from those communities where we're exploring standing up more MIQ facilities. But it's not just the physical facilities; it's also the staff. We've got a health workforce required to support these facilities, and that is a workforce that at the moment is very, very stretched, and there's not an easy way of expanding the size of the health workforce. Similarly, the security workforce that goes with that. We're using our Defence Force a lot, but there are other requirements to staff and make sure those facilities are operating safely.

So there's a lot of work happening in that space. I do acknowledge it's difficult when families are being separated, but I also just want to say—and I do want to reiterate this—people do have to adjust their expectations a little bit at the moment. The ability to travel for family events, like weddings and birthdays, is a lot more restricted in a global pandemic than it would be in normal times, and so people need to be realistic about that.

Media: Could you give us an update on what the quarantine capacity is, how many rooms are in use, and how many are still available?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So we have got an additional facility that's being stood up at the moment, and it will bring several hundred additional rooms. That's the Holiday Inn out by the airport. It's being converted for use for quarantine purposes. That will bring several hundred more rooms in. That should come on stream within the next 24 to 36 hours or so. We know that we've got enough within the two facilities we're operating at the moment—the Jet Park and the Novotel Ibis at Ellerslie—to accommodate the cases that we're seeing today, and still have some left over after that. As of early this morning, I think there are about 12 cases from yesterday that all were still awaiting transfer, so we've more or less cleared the backlog there. And that system is operating as we would expect it to, where people are being relatively efficiently transported into quarantine facilities. But we will need that extra facility coming on in the next 24 to 36 hours in order to make sure we can accommodate potential cases tomorrow and the day after, and so on.

We will get to the point, too, during this week probably, where people will start to leave at the other end of that cycle where they will be recovering, and that will, again, free up some of those rooms. So it's not that we have to continue increasing capacity for every new case we get, because we will start to release some capacity as well. But we keep modelling that. But, of course, I do just want to emphasise and I want to acknowledge the staff who work in these facilities—they are under an enormous amount of pressure. It is a very stretched workforce. And so my thanks on behalf of the whole country for the work that they are doing.

Media: Where are things at with the ventilation upgrades that were happening right across MIQ?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So they're at various stages right the way through the network, depending on the complexity of the work that was required. So in some cases, it was a case of cleaning out air ducts, for example. The dust had built up within them, which meant the air wasn't flowing as it should do. Sometimes the facility needs to be emptied for some of that work to be done. Other times, it might be able to be done on a floor-by-floor basis, while there are still people in it. In other cases, it's more significant work that's needing to be done. Some of the facilities, it's just minor maintenance things, for example, like the duct between a bathroom air vent and the main ventilation system might have worked loose over many, many years. So all of those things get followed through. The goal is, as much as we can, where we can, to provide negative pressure within a room, which means air doesn't flow out of the room and into the corridors, because that's how we can reduce the risk of airborne transmission through those things. So it is at different stages.

Now, also it is important to remember that all of the facilities we're talking about are different facilities. They've got different types of air conditioning systems. So it's difficult to give you a good, accurate "This is where we sit across the whole network.", because every one of those facilities is different. They've got different challenges. In some cases, it's that they needed new filtration systems. Other cases, the filtration was fine; it was just the air flow wasn't right. So all of that work—I'm not an expert in that, but we do have experts that are looking pretty closely at all of that.

Media: Just to follow on from Jason's question earlier in terms of the pressure, while, yes, it's reasonable to say that people overseas have to accept that pressures go on facilities, isn't it also reasonable for people to expect that a large facility like the Crowne Plaza should be on stream and shouldn't be requiring checks to make sure it meets Delta standards, when Delta is already in the country?

Hon Chris Hipkins: The Crowne Plaza is currently empty on schedule. So one of the things about the cohorting that we do at the moment is that facilities do empty out. They get cleaned. Minor

maintenance that's required between cohorts gets done. The Crowne Plaza is currently at that point of the cycle, and so we do expect that. I think the current bookings have that starting to fill up again from—I think it's early next week it was due to start filling up again through the cohorting system.

There are sometimes gaps between cohorts. Sometimes the gaps are bigger than others. One of the challenges around managing bookings—I want to highlight that, at the moment, if you looked at the MIQ numbers today—and I've got them here somewhere; I just don't have them right with me—the overall headcount number of today is relatively low, but we've got six planes coming in today and seven planes coming in tomorrow, so we're expecting to see quite a jump in the overall numbers. Sometimes there are days where the overall number of rooms occupied goes down. That doesn't mean the network is not being used to its maximum. We're certainly aiming to use the network to its maximum, but there will be periods where one of the facilities might sit empty for a few days between cohorts as we seek to accommodate all the bookings that we've got.

Media: Yeah, but you have a cohort that's coming in—I think it's scheduled for 9 September. Crowne Plaza has been empty for at least a week now. Are you suggesting that there is no capacity in the system to deep clean a hotel and make it available so that people can actually book MIQ spots? You're saying it's more reasonable to continue to pause that opening for them.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, we haven't made a decision on whether the Crowne Plaza will be able to open for that booking on the 9th. We're getting further assessments of that facility done at—

Media: So it could remain offline longer?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, no, I haven't said that; I've said that we're getting the latest information probably at some point this afternoon on the latest review work that's been done there. I would highlight, as we have previously, that there was a full infection prevention and control order for that facility done in June, and the next one was due to be done about now. It was due to be done in September. That's part of the regular improvement cycle that we have. So all of that work, of course, is very important to us. We learn more all of the time about how we can continue to improve the system.

Media: But that doesn't marry with what the Prime Minister said, which is that she's asked for a different review in terms of looking at it from a Delta perspective. That's not just your normal everyday review that you're doing with all of these facilities; she's been quite clear that she wanted something more done.

Hon Chris Hipkins: All of the IPC audits that we do on a regular cycle take into account the latest information about what we know about the virus. So, of course, the information that we've got about Delta has really started to firm up in the last six to eight weeks. Now, yes, Delta's been around for longer than that, but the scientific advice on what Delta means in terms of transmissibility and so on has really only started to become apparent in the last six to eight weeks or so, and so that, of course, gets factored into the next round of reviews. Because of the issue that we've had with the Crowne Plaza, we're having a very, very close look at that. We won't put more people into it until we are satisfied that that risk is as low as it possibly can be.

Media: The MIQ pause—will that have any impact on RSE workers coming into the country?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We're still continuing to work with our potential quarantine-free travel partners, so we've been talking to the three Pacific countries that we mentioned before—Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu—about the ability to bring RSE workers into the country without the 14 days in MIQ. But there will still be some public health measures in place: vaccination, testing, potential isolation on arrival by the employers. Those are all things that we're working through with those three countries to be able to do that. If we can avoid having RSE workers who are coming from countries where there is no COVID-19 currently in their community—and in the case, I think, all those countries there has not been COVID-19 in their communities—if we can do that without having to stress the MIQ system, that is, of course, our first preference, which is what we have been working towards.

Media: A question for Dr Bloomfield in terms of tangihanga. Funeral services have reached out and said the Ministry of Health has informed them, saying that under alert level 4, tangihanga guidelines will change. Where are these at now?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Kia ora. First of all, under alert level 3, of course, tangihanga outside of Auckland and Northland at the moment can occur and have up to 10 people. Over the last couple of days, I've received and signed off advice around safe ways that whānau could view the body, and that advice will be going through the system as an exemption as long as the funeral directors have got the appropriate protocols in place. So I'm expecting that advice will go out to the sector any day.

Media: On case numbers, Minister—this is probably actually to Dr Bloomfield. Talking to public health experts and modellers, they all believe the peak has either happened or it's on the way down. They say the biggest risks are the transmissions that could happen at essential workplaces and therefore cause super-spreading events. So, I just ask you: is this also your biggest concern, and therefore how worried are you about the three infections at the Tegel chicken factory?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yeah so what we're most concerned about now, of course, as you said, is essential workers who may infect colleagues within a workplace setting, or people gathering when they shouldn't be—and we've seen this as a big problem in Sydney where you've had those private gatherings and large numbers of people have become infected.

Returning to your question about the Tegel factory, the public health units have been working very closely with the employer there, who's taking a very risk-averse approach to closing down parts of the production if needs be, testing people who may have been exposed. The workers who tested positive there have been linked back to exposures in the community, so that's important in the first place. But, secondly, and this is an important message for employers, is it's very important that if you have casual workforce—and this is particularly in the food manufacturing distribution area, and also in the security area—that you confine those casual employees to just working at one site and not working across multiple sites. That's something that our public health unit has seen—they have observed. I think most employers are aware of this and are taking steps, but I do need to emphasise that will be very important in helping limit the potential for, if an essential worker becomes infected, spreading that through a number of workplaces.

Media: Can I follow with you, Minister, because a few days ago the Prime Minister said that she would hesitate to tighten restrictions, particularly at businesses, if there was spread. There has been spread. Are there plans to tighten level 4 or level 3 lockdown restrictions at businesses?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, we haven't made further decisions on that yet, but I will echo what the Prime Minister has said. We look at the evidence of what's emerging every day to make sure that the level 4 restrictions that we've got in place are achieving the desired outcome, which is to stop the spread of the virus, so that we can get back to the point where people—where everybody—has a greater freedom of movement. So, of course, we review information every day. We get more information about latest cases, case investigations, every day. Where that throws up issues that we need to deal with, then, of course, we then consider those.

Media: Some of the New Zealanders who are stranded in Australia are also in receipt of the main benefit. The Minister of social development came out yesterday and said that a suggestion is for them to visit a mission for support. Do you think that's fair?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, so I haven't seen that. I haven't been briefed on that particular topic, so I'll have to refer you back to the Minister of social development for further questions on that one.

Media: Just in regards to 12-year-olds being able to be vaccinated now: once we hit level 2, are you looking at going into kura and schools to get young people vaccinated?

Hon Chris Hipkins: There are some logistical challenges around using kura and schools as sites for vaccination which make that quite difficult, particularly given the timing that we're talking about—exams later on in the year, when we might get to that point where the ability to move our on-site vaccinators around a bit, that might coincide with exams, so that creates a bit of a challenge. What we have heard from school communities, actually, and in the engagement that I've had with them as Minister of Education, is that a lot of their families are indicating that they would prefer to take a family-based approach to vaccination, which is that when their parents go to get vaccinated, they'd like to be able to take their kids with them and do it all together rather than have the parents and the kids vaccinated at separate sites. I think that makes a lot of sense, so we're seeing good indications that that's what's happening already, and I'd certainly encourage families to take that approach.

Media: Dr Bloomfield, just quickly, the Northern Regional Health Coordination Centre are reporting some good stats in terms of vaccinating homeless people. Is this something we're going to see across the country, or is this all dependent on particular DHBs?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: There have been specific efforts in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch, where the large part of our homeless people are. So I know each of those DHBs has had a range of initiatives in place to reach out, in conjunction, usually, with the relevant City Mission or homeless shelter. So that's already happened, and I know there will be ongoing efforts in this regard.

Hon Chris Hipkins: We'll have to keep it reasonably short today because we do have parliamentary question time to grapple with today, but I'll come back to the [inaudible].

question time to grapple with today, but I'll come back to the [inaudible].

Media: On that note, do you think it's responsible for MPs to have flown in from all over the country to attend Parliament in level 4, and do you think whether Parliament is sitting is an issue that New Zealanders are focused on during this pandemic?

Hon Chris Hipkins: In answer to the latter part of your question, no, I don't think that whether or not we get to partake in the pantomime of parliamentary question time is something that's a particular priority to New Zealanders at the moment. We did create an opportunity for question time to be held remotely so the MPs could remain at home and participate fully in parliamentary proceedings whilst adhering to the alert level restrictions that we ask every other New Zealander to adhere to.

I do want to also correct some misinformation that has been circulated in recent days. In all of the discussions with the Opposition about that, and their urging for the Epidemic Response Committee to be re-established, never at any point did they indicate that that was as an alternative to Parliament sitting in person. They wanted both to happen. They wanted Parliament to sit in person and the Epidemic Response Committee to be re-established. So the reinvention of history in the last few days, where they've said that they offered that as an alternative, is simply not true. That was never part of the conversations that we had with them.

As to whether or not they feel that they should travel around the country, I would simply note that no Labour members of Parliament have felt fit to travel to Parliament for question time.

Media: How disappointing is the politicking around this?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I think it is disappointing. We worked really hard to try and find a constructive alternative. Look, I'm of the Leader of the House of the Parliament. I passionately believe in parliamentary democracy. I believe that scrutiny is very important. You'll very seldom see me turning down an opportunity to be questioned—whether it's here, whether it's in question time, whether it's at a select committee, I try and make myself available for as many of those opportunities as possible, because it is important. It is the life blood of democracy. Questioning, dissent, argument—they are very important. There are ways to do those things safely without requiring MPs to travel all over the country.

Media: And just on MIQ, on the pushback from communities about standing up new MIQs in their communities, could you end up forcing it on them with a parliamentary order?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Sorry, run that one past me again.

Media: On the pushback from communities about standing up new MIQs, could you end up forcing those MIQs on them with a parliamentary order?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Oh, an order under the Act. We wouldn't need to do that. The key constraint around standing up an MIQ, really, is around getting a willing partner—so a facility that's willing to partner with us, and a workforce: making sure that we can supply the workforce for that. So those are the two key things. Now, we do take community views into account and we try and work with communities to deal with any concerns that they have. I understand in Rotorua, for example, they have a concern around homelessness that they want the Government to work with them on, and we are working with them on that. I'm not leading that work; Dr Woods is leading that work. But we do acknowledge community concern and feedback, but, ultimately, where we need to stand up new facilities, that's what we need to do.

Media: Sorry; I have two more, if that's OK. Did you catch Judith Collins' interview on breakfast television this morning?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No, sorry. I didn't.

Media: And the first marae-based drive-through vaccination was opened in Auckland today. Why not do this sooner if we know Māori vaccination rates need to be boosted?

Hon Chris Hipkins: As you will have seen over recent days, we're doing a lot to expand delivery capacity. Now that we have bigger doses of the vaccine coming into the country, our ability to stand up new sites is not infinite either. In this regard, there's a health workforce challenge. There's also, of course, the issue of making sure we've got sufficient supply. And we should have more to say on supply in the next few days, at least to give people clarity around what the supply situation's going to be for the month of September.

Media: Yeah—a lot of the country moved down to level 3 today. Have you received any initial reports around whether the rules at level 3 are being complied with?

Hon Chris Hipkins: I haven't heard any particular concerns around the rules being complied with. I, obviously, travelled in the Wellington region today myself, and saw still quite a low level of people movement across the region, which is encouraging. It suggests that people aren't going to work unless they have to; they are, you know, continuing to stick with their bubbles. Their bubbles can get a little bigger at alert level 3. You know, I know that some families will be reconnecting—you know, merging their bubbles at level 3, as they are allowed to do. But I think people are generally—from what I have seen and from what I have heard—sticking to the rules.

Media: Minister, there's been a huge demand for food parcels this year. Some charities we've spoken to said that last year there was a state of national emergency declared. It meant that it made it easier to get food out. They want to know why that didn't happen this time.

Hon Chris Hipkins: We don't need a state of emergency in order to do all of the things that we need to do, because of the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act, which we didn't have in place last time and so we were having to rely on a variety of different legislative tools. And, of course, the legal history of all of that's now very clear to everybody. We've now got better legal tools around that. Where there are issues around food parcels, and so on, we will work with those providers to make sure that we're resolving those issues for them.

Media: Just on behalf of a colleague, how is it fair that Kiwis are being stopped from coming home, while the English netball team has been given 40 places in MIQ this month?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Like I said, we have been reviewing all of the group bookings that are coming in. Where it's feasible to be able to delay those—that particular booking I understand, I think, is already under way; where it is feasible to delay group bookings, then we are looking very closely at all of those.

Media: So there's going to be sportsmen in the country when people can't come home. How's that fair?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, as I said, where it's feasible for us to delay a group booking, then we are doing that. We're doing that with RSE workers. We're looking, again, very closely at all of those group bookings to see whether there are further bookings that can be pushed back in the system, even cancelled where necessary, to free up that extra capacity.

Media: Just two quick questions for you, Dr Bloomfield. Can you just say whether that advice that Mr Hipkins just gave before about level 3 was accurate? Because my understanding was that merging bubbles was around only if you need it for childcare or if someone was in an isolated bubble, then you can merge, but you weren't recommending bubbles just to merge for the sake of it.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, that was, effectively, what I was referring to. So if people are able to amalgamate their bubbles where it's required for childcare, where people are living alone, and so on—that was, effectively, what I was referring to.

Media: It's not families hanging out with families for the sake of it, though, is it?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Not for the sake of it, but people should follow the guidelines. But I am aware that there can be more of that—there can be more of that at level 3 than there can be at level 4.

Media: OK, that's cool. I was just confused because Dr Bloomfield's face looked confused. Anyway, second to that, can I also ask, please, what your advice was to Parliament in terms of level 4 versus level 3 in its sitting, because if you take the Green Party—they didn't attend yesterday, but are attending today. How does Judith Collins coming from Auckland yesterday, and still being here today actually change?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So just to rehearse: the advice I was asked to give was around convening Parliament in an alert level 4 setting, and I gave that advice around distancing, use of masks, and, of course, a limited number of people in the Chamber. That advice seemed to have been taken, at least looking at the photos yesterday. But, to be honest—and the Minister's just hinted at this—really, the same should apply under alert level 3. Alert level 3 is still designed to restrict unnecessary contact between people. So I would see that advice as applying through the week—that is, keeping those measures in place to reduce any residual risk there could be of people transmitting the virus between each other.

Media: School holidays begin on 4 October. Although it's a month away, all going well, it may be around then that Auckland is just coming out of level 3. Really, what I'm wondering is, as Minister of Education, has there been any thought given to bringing the school holidays forward so that it's during the holidays, as at a time when people may actually be going back to work, you know, the

during the lockdown, so at a time when people may actually be going back to work—you know, the kids can take time off, can get more teacher time, and that people can get back to work when their kids are back at school.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, I keep that under review. I haven't made final decisions about that at this point. There are some logistical challenges around moving school holiday dates around that make it quite challenging to do. We have pushed back the dates for exams to give those kids a bit more time to prepare—mixed bag of response to that, actually. So I think the teachers welcome that extra time; some of the students, not so wild about that. I think they want to get their exams over and done with. But we are, of course, always looking at shifting dates, where we can. Moving school holiday dates is incredibly challenging, and it's even more challenging where the proposal would be to do that for one part of the country and not for another part of the country. But, look, I don't want to completely rule it out. It's unlikely, but I don't want to completely rule it out because we don't know what we'll be dealing with in a couple of weeks' time.

Media: Can I do a quick follow-up on Whati's question before about vaccinations in schools and kura? We have had quite successful vaccination roll-outs of, like, meningitis vaccines in schools before. Why not consider that?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, we don't yet know whether that's actually going to be the best way to reach those young people. If they're coming forward to be vaccinated with their parents, which isn't necessarily the case in some of the immunisation campaigns we've had that have targeted schools in the past, that actually getting families to be vaccinated all at once could well cover the vast majority of that age cohort, bearing in mind that we do have a limited number of—you know, vaccination workforce limited capacity to administer vaccines, and we want to do that in the most efficient way as possible. It takes quite a bit of resource to stand up a new vaccination site. In the case of schools, you might be standing up a new site that's only operational for a day to get through people, when it actually might be more efficient to get those people to go to a different site where they could still get vaccinated, but it doesn't have all of the complexity of standing up new sites all of the time.

Thanks, everybody.

Conclusion of press conference

Update on cases for 1 September

[Update on today's cases | health.govt.nz](#)

(https://web.archive.org/web/20210902072400mp_/https://www.health.govt.nz/news-media/media-releases/75-community-cases-covid-19-one-new-case-managed-isolation-more-84000-vaccines-administered).