



133 Molesworth Street
PO Box 5013
Wellington 6140
New Zealand
T+64 4 496 2000

30 August 2023

Al Johnson

By email: fyi-request-23672-6b34e9a8@requests.fyi.org.nz
Ref: H2023030095

Tēnā koe Al

Response to your request for official information

Thank you for your request under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) to Manatū Hauora (the Ministry of Health) on 2 August 2023 for information regarding COVID-19 Alert Levels in New Zealand. You requested:

*“All documentation, including meeting minutes or other communications, that show alert level creation, development and finalisation between the 20th of February to the 21st of March 2020. This includes all communications from other government and non-government sources on the development to create and finalise the alert levels that were announced. This below page notes members of a group who were involved in the public health response and available documents that were developed to support that - I point it out in case there's any confusion as I am not requesting these publicly available documents:
<https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/covid-19-modelling-and-other-commissioned-reports>”*

The decisions to create, develop, finalise and adopt the Alert Levels and impose nationwide controls to manage the COVID-19 pandemic were made by Cabinet, or Ministers with a delegated power to act, on the advice of the Director-General of Health. The Alert Levels and nationwide controls were established to break the chains of transmission and avoid an exponential rise in cases, as well as reduce the potential impacts on the health system for those with more severe disease.

Cabinet advice is publicly available on the ‘Unite Against COVID-19’ webpage. This can be found on the following link: <https://covid19.govt.nz/updates-and-resources/legislation-and-key-documents/proactiverelase/health-response/>

During the time period covered by your request, work on COVID-19 was led out of the multi-agency National Crisis Response Centre. The COVID-19 Group, within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), was responsible for providing integrated strategy and policy advice on the response to COVID-19 from an all of government point of view from December 2020 to 29 March 2023.

Extensive material relating to your request has been proactively released by DPMC, including from the initial multi-agency work, and is available through the links set out below. The proactive release material is dated from the start of New Zealand’s response to the pandemic to 30 June 2022. Key links include:

- www.dPMC.govt.nz/publications/covid-19-response-january-june-2022.
- www.dPMC.govt.nz/publications/covid-19-response-2021.
- www.dPMC.govt.nz/publications/covid-19-response-2020.
- www.dPMC.govt.nz/publications/covid-19-reviews-and-lessons-learned.
- www.dPMC.govt.nz/publications/covid-19-insights-reports-and-research.

In addition to the material already publicly available, we have identified one further paper in scope of your request, titled *COVID-19 Current State, Trajectories and Interventions*. This paper sought the agreement to an early iteration of the Alert Level Framework from a group of Ministers with delegated power to make decisions on COVID-19 issues. Please find this paper attached and released to you in full.

I trust this information fulfils your request. If you wish to discuss any aspect of your request with us, including this decision, please feel free to contact the OIA Services Team on: oiagr@health.govt.nz.

Under section 28(3) of the Act, you have the right to ask the Ombudsman to review any decisions made under this request. The Ombudsman may be contacted by email at: info@ombudsman.parliament.nz or by calling 0800 802 602.

Please note that this response, with your personal details removed, may be published on the Manatū Hauora website at: www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/responses-official-information-act-requests.

Nāku noa, nā



Stephen Glover
Group Manager, COVID-19
Strategy, Policy and Legislation | Te Pou Rautaki

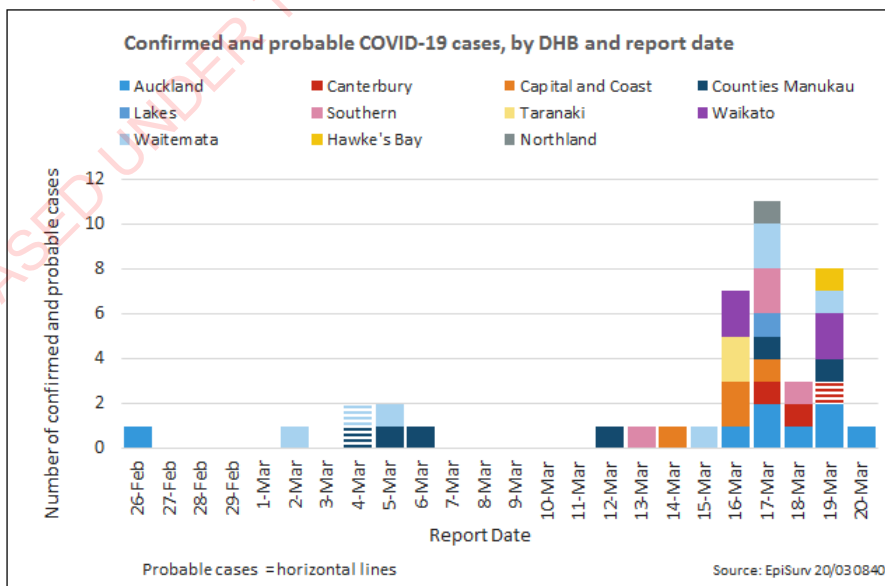
COVID-19 – Current state, trajectories and interventions

20 March 2020

To: Chair, CVD Ministers

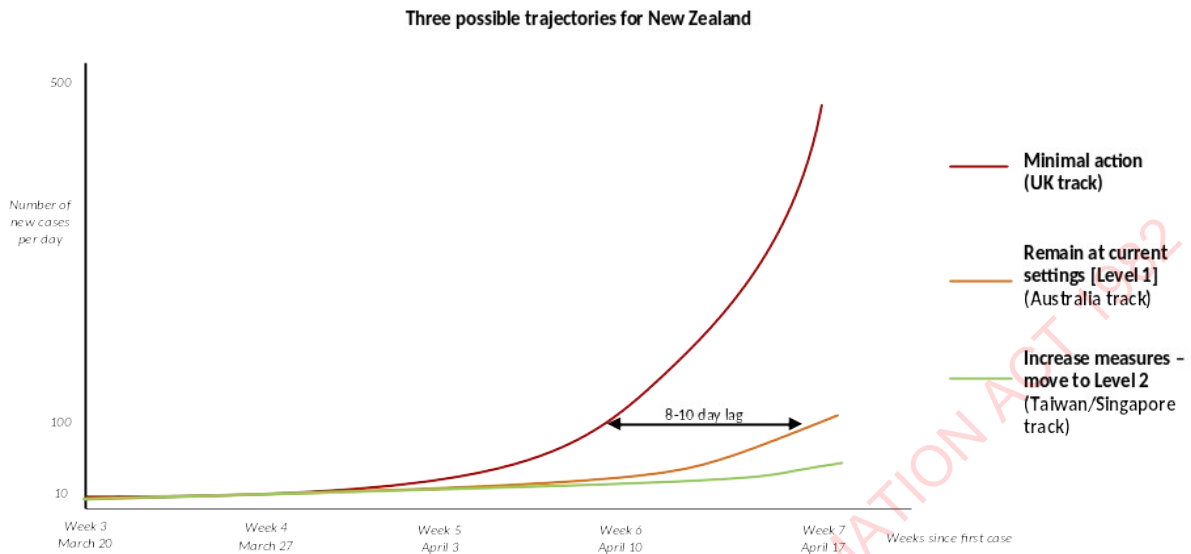
1. Assessment of current situation

- New Zealand is going hard and going early. On 19 March border restrictions were maximised to lessen the risk of New Zealand importing cases of COVID-19. We are ramping up testing, contact tracing and self-isolation requirements.¹
- All our confirmed cases either travelled from overseas or were close household contacts of an ‘imported case’. However, we are seeing an uptick in imported cases around the country (refer to graph below).
- We do not know whether community transmission is occurring in New Zealand. Epidemiologists consider it likely there is some ‘silent’ transmission occurring in the community. However, we have not had any seriously ill patients with COVID-19 pneumonia, which generally develops over 2-3 weeks from infection.
- The next 2-3 weeks is critical to New Zealand’s COVID-19 response. Our ability to stamp it out depends on ramping up testing to identify cases, scaling up contact tracing and enforcing self-isolation. We are acting rapidly on all three fronts.
- If community transmission becomes widespread we will have lost the opportunity gained by closing the border. International advice is that for each case we may be missing nine. Even with no further imported cases, if we have missed early cases transmitting silently, we could suddenly face an *exponential rise* in cases as has happened elsewhere. To minimise the likelihood of this occurring, decisive action is needed immediately.



¹ Currently almost 8000 people or households are in self-isolation.

2. Three possible trajectories



New Zealand has a stark choice. Iran and Italy show dramatically what happens when action is taken too late. Their health systems are overwhelmed which is leading to alarming case fatality rates. The UK appears to be following Italy's trajectory with a two-week lag. The UK only began responding with significant public health measures after the exponential growth in cases occurred. Following the UK may be Australia in 8-10 days. Without further action, New Zealand may follow the path of Australia, where community transmission is occurring in New South Wales. New Zealand needs to act decisively to increase containment measures if we want to stay on the trajectories of Singapore and Taiwan, notwithstanding cultural differences. As an island nation this is feasible.

Attached are charts which provide more granular data points comparing countries from the date of their first cases.

3. Interventions

The attached COVID-19 alert levels framework sets out groups of interventions. These increase in intensity, ie they impose increasing levels of restriction on the movement and interaction of people.

Evidence from public health shows that we need a suite of interventions applied together if we are to contain COVID-19. Each alert level therefore contains an integrated set of measures which builds on the actions in the level below.

The framework sets out four alert levels, which are triggered depending on the risk and spread of COVID-19.

These alert levels can be applied to towns, cities, TLAs, regions or the whole country. For instance, Dunedin could be at Level 4, while the rest of the country is at Level 2. In a worst-case scenario, the whole country would be set at Level 4 for several months. It would be very difficult to sustain nationwide Level 4 for an extended period.

At present, the whole of New Zealand is at Level 1, but we have already applied *parts* of Level 2, namely maximum border restrictions and tightening of restrictions on mass gatherings. We

recommend New Zealand move completely to Level 2 immediately and remain there for up to 30 days initially. The move to Level 2 reflects the heightened risk of importing COVID-19 cases at this time as many New Zealanders return home from overseas and we see an uptick in reported cases here.

In addition, we recommend bringing the school holidays forward by one week, but making the last week of term teacher-only days to allow schools to prepare for teaching remotely.

If Ministers wished to intensify the effects of Level 2, by also picking some of the options from Level 3, then bringing the school holidays forward by one week would reinforce the suppression effect with the least disruption given the Easter school holiday break. It should however be noted that:

- a. Schools and parents will need time to prepare; and
- b. There will still be disruptions for families and working parents.

There might also be some value for using this as a practice run in the event that we have to move to Level 3 permanently. Formal advice from the Ministry of Education should be sought on impacts and implementation.

The key changes in moving from current settings to a full Level 2 are:

- Encouraging workplaces to actively consider alternative ways of working (eg remote working, shift-based working, physical distancing within the workplace, staggering meal breaks, flexible leave arrangements)
- Activating business continuity plans to support alternative ways of working and to prepare for possible disruption should the alert level rise to 3
- Recommending New Zealanders postpone or cancel non-essential domestic travel
- Advising high-risk individuals (such as those over 65 and those with comorbidities) to stay at home.

This is a fast changing situation that calls for strategic judgment in a context of uncertainty. The broad approach has to be one of least regrets. That means a bias towards acting sooner rather than later if in doubt, to avoid the need for even tighter restrictions later.

We can move between alert levels as containment of COVID-19 allows, ie we have the ability to flex. If we are successful in the next month(s) and are confident the risk of spread is very low, we could potentially go back down to Level 1.

We note that a lift to Level 2 will require advice on the implications of actively considering alternative ways of working (such as for the education sector) and details for high-risk populations which will be advised to remain at home.

4. Implications of interventions

The health of New Zealanders is the top priority. Maintaining public health may require us to move up the alert levels.

The economic and social implications of moving up the alert system are very significant. The framework sets these out at a high-level.

Further support for New Zealand businesses and the well-being of New Zealanders will be needed as we move up and down the alert levels to respond to the economic, employment and social

implications. We will need to support the maintenance of social connections and links to the workplace.

The government has already acted decisively with New Zealand's most significant peace-time economic response package. The Minister of Finance is actively discussing further support for small and medium businesses and tailor-made support for larger and complex businesses.

We note that, to date, most of the economic hardship related to COVID-19 has been related to the global economy, rather than as a result of public health measures in New Zealand.

5. Public Communications

Good public communications will promote adherence to the measures we implement, while minimizing the number of people who take unnecessary, and potentially damaging, actions above and beyond those required.

The public need to trust our response and have confidence that the measures are appropriate, so we must provide information on the measures we are taking and the reasons for them. With the announcement of Level 2 restrictions, we will reinforce:

- We are going hard and going early
- We have taken decisive action, but the risk of importation remains high, and there is a real possibility community transmission could occur.
- We are taking all practical steps needed to stamp out these cases and minimize the risk of COVID-19 spreading.
- New Zealanders should stick to these measures – it will take all of us to unite against COVID-19.

Guidance is being written for all of the measures in Level 2 – for example who is classified as a high-risk individual advised to remain at home, and what defines essential domestic travel.

It is also time to begin detailing the actions we are planning for level 3. We must offer the public assurance on when they can expect further measures. These communications should reinforce:

- We are actively planning stricter measures that will be needed if we experience community transmission.
- These measures will include school closures, non-essential business and venue closures and transport restrictions. These will be put in place if we identify any community transmission, clusters of infection or experience any increasing difficulty in containing COVID-19.
- The restrictions may be put in place at local, regional or national levels.
- We still only have isolated imported cases, but we are ramping up our testing significantly and continuously monitoring for any signs the situation could be worsening.
- We are planning for the worst. These measures are not required now, and you should only act on them when the Government advises you to.

Such warnings are likely to exacerbate alarm and panic, and may have consequences, including further stockpiling, removal of children from schools, and greater internal travel, as people relocate to be with families. However, increasing panic is likely regardless, and without such information, communities are more likely to respond and act on rumours than official advice.

Instead, we must reinforce the consequences of these actions, including the harm they can pose to vulnerable people in their networks (including the elderly) and wider society. We should offer hope, that the measures are temporary and give us a chance to avoid an outbreak, and build solidarity, reinforcing the need to unite against COVID-19. Continued early engagement with and public support from key stakeholders will assist.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend you:

Agree to the attached COVID-19 alert levels which contain specific triggers based on COVID-19 risk and spread, and response measures

Note that the alert levels increase in intensity, ie they impose increasing levels of restriction on the movement and interaction of people with consequent impacts on the daily lives of New Zealanders

Note that the alert levels may be applied to a town, city, TLA, region or the whole country

Note that different parts of the country may be at different alert levels at one time

Note that there is a risk of some 'silent' community transition occurring and that decisive and rapid action is needed to stamp that out or slow the spread should it be occurring

Agree to move New Zealand to Level 2 as soon as practicable for 30 days

Note this will be reviewed regularly

Agree in principle to bring forward the school holidays by one week with the last week of term reserved for teacher-only days, pending formal advice from the Ministry of Education on the impacts and implementation of this

Brook Barrington

Chief Executive, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

John Ombler

COVID-19 All of Government Controller

Ashley Bloomfield

Director-General, Ministry of Health

Juliet Gerrard

Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor