



Briefing

REVIEW OF ALERT LEVEL SETTINGS FOR THE WAIKATO ALERT LEVEL 3 AREA – 27 OCTOBER 2021

To: Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

Date	26/10/2021	Priority	[URGENT]
Deadline	27/10/2021	Briefing Number	DPMC-2021/22-657

Purpose

This briefing provides advice on the Waikato Alert Level 3 area (the Waikato) and seeks agreement for it to either remain at Alert Level 3 but step down to stage one of the reduced settings, or for it to remain at Alert Level 3 with current settings.

Recommendations

- Note** that since Tuesday 17 August 2021, 91 cases of COVID-19 have been identified in the Waikato region.
- Note** that in the 24 hours to 9am Tuesday 26 October, four cases have been identified in the Waikato region.
- Note** that the public health risk assessment completed on Tuesday 26 October assesses the risk of community transmission within Raglan, Te Awamutu area and the rest of the Waikato as Medium.
- Note** the public health risk assessment recommends the Waikato Alert Level 3 area move to stage 1 of the reduced Alert Level 3 from 11:59 on Wednesday 27 October 2021.

5. **Agree to**

EITHER

- 5.1. move the Waikato Alert Level 3 area to stage one of the reduced Alert Level 3;

OR

YES NO

5.2. keep the Waikato Alert Level 3 area at Alert Level 3.

YES NO

6. **Agree** Cabinet next review the Alert Level for the Waikato Alert Level 3 area along with Auckland on Monday 1 November 2021.

YES NO

7. **Agree** this briefing is proactively released, with any appropriate redactions where information would have been withheld under the Official Information Act 1982 in December 2021.

YES NO

Ben White

Ben White
Policy Manager

26 / 10 /2021

Chris Hipkins

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

27 / 10 /2021

Contact for telephone discussion if required:

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Background

1. Following detection of 2 cases of COVID-19 in the Raglan and Hamilton East communities, parts of the Waikato (Raglan, Te Kauwhata, Huntly and Ngāruawāhia) moved to Alert Level 3 on 3 October 2021. The boundary was then extended to include Te Kuiti, Waipa District and Ōtorohanga Districts on 7 October. On 21 October you agreed the Waikato should remain at Alert Level 3 with a review on 27 October [DPMC-2021/22-631 refers].

Situation Report

2. As at 9am Tuesday 26 October, there have been 2,759 confirmed cases of COVID-19 detected in the community throughout New Zealand since 17 August 2021, of which 91 are in the Waikato. In the 24 hours to 9am Thursday 21 October, 79 new cases were identified in the community, four of which are in the Waikato.

Public health risk assessment and public health advice

3. The Ministry of Health completed a public health risk assessment on Tuesday 26 October. It notes that while the risk of undetected community transmission in part of Waikato is not increasing, the situation in the area is not fully contained and remains a concern. This is because six cases that remain unlinked to known cases. The Ministry of Health therefore recommends that the Waikato Alert Level 3 area move to stage one of the reduced Alert Level 3 settings from 11.59pm Wednesday 27 October.
4. Of the four new cases reported in Te Awamutu on 26 October, all are close contacts of known cases and were in home isolation when detected.
5. There are three subclusters in the Waikato outbreak – Raglan, Hamilton and Te Awamutu. However, most of the current cases are linked to Te Awamutu and the surrounding areas of Kihikihi and Ōtorohanga.
6. The Hamilton subcluster is contained. It is in an extended family, all of whom are in a managed isolation facility.
7. The Raglan sub-cluster appears to have burned itself out with the last case in that region reported on Thursday 14 October.
8. The Te Awamutu subcluster is ongoing, and this is where most of the recent cases are emerging. Cases are still being identified as being contacts retrospectively, and most of the recent cases are occurring in known contacts.



9. The Waikato Public Health Unit (PHU) report that there are currently six unlinked cases associated with this outbreak. Two of these unlinked cases were identified early in the outbreak (Friday 8 October) and there has not been any onward transmission.
10. The other four unlinked cases are part of the same community and it is likely that links will be found. A recent unlinked case has been identified in Hamilton with no known contacts. However, this case fits the same demographic as the other cases so it is likely a link will be found. Waikato PHU are awaiting whole genome sequencing for this case.
11. Waikato PHU and Māori providers are working closely with the affected community to build rapport so that contacts can continue to be identified. This is achieving some success, e.g. by getting cases to ask their associates to get tested and then linking them accordingly.

Testing

12. Testing rates have been high since the initial move to Alert Level 3. In the past five days over 15,000 community tests have been processed – approximately 2,000 more than at the time of the previous public health risk assessment on Thursday 21 October.

Table 1 - Daily community tests completed by Waikato DHB as at 6.15am 26 October 2021

Date	Thursday 21/10	Friday 22/10	Saturday 23/10	Sunday 24/10	Monday 25/10
Total	2,897	2,813	4,566	3,187	1,951
Per 1000 population	6.7	6.5	10.6	7.4	4.5

13. Testing numbers in certain areas with recent focus or highest risk is outlined below but are not yet sufficient for the appropriate sub-populations. However, these numbers do provide an additional layer of assurance that further community cases may be detected and that there is no identified “leakage” into the general community. Ōtorohanga is lower as the cases there were only notified on Sunday 24 October.

Table 2 –Testing rates between 18 and 24 October 2021 in affected areas

Location	Tests per 1000 population
Te Awamutu North	136
Te Awamutu Stadium	123
Te Awamutu West	111
Te Awamutu Central	89
Ōtorohanga	54
Kihikihi	142

Wastewater results

14. There have been no unexpected wastewater detections since the Te Awamutu and Kihikihi results on 19 October.

15. Following the link to the case identified in Blenheim on 23 October, wastewater testing in Tokoroa, Blenheim and Picton were undertaken on Tuesday 26 October 2021 and the results are due on Wednesday 27 or Thursday 28 October 2021.
16. Samples from Huntly, Maramarua, Matangi, Tauwhare and Te Kowhai were not collected this week due to a lack of available samplers. Sampling will be resumed from these sites next week although samples will only be taken once rather than twice a week.

Vaccination rates in Waikato

17. Overall Waikato vaccination rates are good. However, vaccination rates of Māori and Pacific peoples and in some of the affected areas remain low. This is an issue as a high proportion of cases in the Waikato are Māori.
18. As of Tuesday 26 October, in Te Awamutu 74.6 percent of Māori have had their first dose and 50.4 percent their second. In Kihikihi, 72.4 percent have had a first doses and 47.5 percent their second.

Table 3 – Vaccine uptake by key ethnicities within Waikato DHB as at 11:59pm 25 October 2021

	First dose			Second dose		
	Māori	Pacific	All ethnicities	Māori	Pacific	All ethnicities
Waikato	70%	84%	85%	47%	64%	68%
New Zealand	69%	83%	87%	49%	65%	71%

Public health risk assessment of community transmission

19. The cases in Waikato are predominantly confined to a specific network of people who have not interacted in mainstream social settings, such as workplaces. This is evidenced by there not having been any major exposure events.
20. There does not appear to have been any major exposure events. Most of the cases appear to know each other and have limited workplace exposures. Despite this, concerns remain. Some cases have no fixed abode, meaning public health officials cannot be entirely confident of their movements and/or contacts.
21. Additionally, some cases do not appear to be observing public health restrictions. Relatively few cases participate in contact tracing (e.g. scanning in at shops) and Waikato PHU report that there continues to be non-permitted movement.
22. Therefore, there could still be some undetected transmission amongst this network.

Public Health recommendations

23. Based on today's public health risk assessment, the Ministry of Health has recommended that the current Waikato Alert Level 3 area move to stage one of the reduced Alert Level 3 settings from 11:59pm Wednesday 27 October. This would bring the Waikato in to line with the restrictions in Auckland. They also recommend Alert Level settings in Waikato should be reviewed by Cabinet on Monday 1 November along with Auckland's Alert Level.
24. The Ministry of Health advise Tokoroa should be closely monitored through testing of the population and an assessment undertaken if there are positive cases given the Marlborough positive case spent time in Tokoroa before travelling to Blenheim.

Rationale for moving the Waikato Alert Level 3 area to stage one of the reduced Alert Level 3

25. The public health risk assessment concluded the available evidence indicates the risk is not increasing and is most likely decreasing. There is therefore a case for gradually easing restrictions in the Waikato. Although public health officials do not consider Alert Level 2 would offer adequate protection, they question whether the current Alert Level 3 rules are proportionate to the level of risk.
26. As noted above the cases in Waikato are predominantly confined to a specific network of people who have not generated major exposure events. Therefore, even though there could still be some undetected transmission amongst this network, it is unlikely that the slight easing of rules in stage one of the reduced of Alert Level 3 settings will materially increase the level of risk to the wider Waikato community.

Alert Level 3 stage one settings proposed for the Waikato

27. Stage one of the stepped down Alert Level 3 settings that apply in Auckland ease several restrictions that support personal wellbeing but introduce minimal risk to. These rules permit the following activities:
 - a) outdoor gatherings between two households, with a maximum of 10 people – the natural ventilation outside makes it harder for the virus to spread;
 - b) an expanded range of recreational activity, including golfing, hunting, boating, fishing, and scuba diving, with a maximum of 10 people;
 - c) permission to travel within the Waikato Alert Level 3 area for recreational activity;
 - d) face-to-face appointments with certain healthcare providers; and
 - e) early learning centres can reopen, with a maximum of 10 children in each bubble.
28. If you agree to apply stage one Alert Level 3 settings to Waikato, it is proposed people living in the Waikato Alert Level 3 area would be confined to that area for recreational purposes. Travel from an Alert Level 3 area in the Waikato to an Alert Level 2 area (e.g. Hamilton to Taupō) would remain restricted, likewise for travel to Auckland (where officials are seeking to suppress the growing spread of COVID-19, unlike in the Waikato which is still pursuing elimination).

Proposal regarding Alert Levels

29. On the basis of the public health risk assessment officials recommend:
- the Waikato Alert Level 3 area moves to stage one of Alert Level 3 from 11:59pm Wednesday 27 October 2021; and
 - these settings are reviewed by Cabinet on Monday 1 November.

Impacts of the proposal to move the Waikato Alert Level 3 area to Alert Level 3 stage one

30. The impacts of the proposal for the Waikato Alert Level 3 area to remain at Alert Level 3 are set out below.

Economic impacts from Alert Levels

31. The Treasury advise that there are no changes to the estimates on the economic impacts of the Waikato Alert Level 3 area remaining at Alert Level 3. The reduction in economic activity per week, as outlined below, is as provided to Cabinet on Monday 18 October [CAB-21-SUB-0422 refers].

Table 4 – Approximate economic impacts of the Alert Level restrictions relative to Alert Level 1 (rounded to nearest \$10m)¹

Restrictions	Reduction in economic activity per week	
AL2 across all of NZ	\$70 million	1% of national GDP
AL3 in Auckland, AL2 rest of country	\$250 million	4% of national GDP
AL3 in Auckland, Waikato ² , AL2 rest of country	\$290 million	5% of national GDP
AL4 across all of NZ	\$1,520 million	25% of national GDP

32. The Waikato region has not seen any major increase in food grants because of the move to Alert Level 3 on 3 October, with the number granted within the Waikato continuing to be comparable to the week prior to the national lockdown in August 2021.
33. MSD has been providing support through the New Zealand Food Network and direct funding for demand for food. This has included support to Waikato-Tainui and a Hamilton kai collective. Providers have noted an increase in demand for food support with some noting this is at least double normal demand for the time of year.

¹ Some of these GDP losses will occur even without Alert Level restrictions, as people adjust their behaviour in response to perceived risk.

² This estimate is based on a scenario where the entire Waikato region is at a standard Alert Level 3. The data currently available does not allow for estimates of sub-regional impacts, or for estimates of the impacts of intermediate steps to ease Auckland's Alert level 3 restrictions.

Impacts on at-risk populations

34. Impacts noted in previous Alert Level reviews of all New Zealand are also evident in the Waikato Alert Level 3 area [CAB-21-SUB-0422 refers]. These include, but are not limited to:
- a) ongoing restrictions on earning capacity;
 - b) inequitable access to material essentials;
 - c) issues related to education and learning;
 - d) issues related to face covering exemptions, particularly for disabled people;
 - e) strong and ongoing demand for mental health support services; and
 - f) continued discrimination towards Pacific and disabled peoples.
35. There is increasing concern about the impact on Māori health caused by the health sector's focus on the pandemic.
36. As advised previously, in the Waikato:
- a) Pacific communities have identified the need for more mobile vaccination hubs in the region to increase vaccination rates amongst the Pacific community. The Ministry for Pacific Peoples (MPP) continues to work with Pacific Providers in the region to support COVID-19 related community initiatives (including vaccination drives). Targeted COVID-19 information campaigns also continue to be supported by MPP.
 - a) Māori vaccination rates increased as a result of Super Saturday, however, there are still many unvaccinated Māori in Waikato, particularly in rural communities.
37. The Māori Communities COVID-19 Fund (MCCF) approved by Cabinet last week will enable greater targeting of unvaccinated Māori. Phase 1 started this week with the immediate focus to provide direct funding to Māori, iwi and community providers, with the Bay of Plenty area being one of the targeted areas for initial investment.

Public attitudes and compliance

38. Social conversation analysis has previously seen social media commentary expressing confusion and disappointment that the Waikato is being kept at a more stringent Alert Level 3 despite few cases while Auckland's Alert Level 3 allows more freedom. Confusion around Alert Levels, and if Alert Levels are changing in response to new cases within the Waikato region have arisen as themes of conversation across Unite Against COVID-19 channels.
39. In their latest COVID-19 Checkpoint report Police stated that between 7 September and 21 October, a total of 7,465 vehicles were turned around at the southern Alert Level boundary checkpoints.

Ability to operationalise Alert Level restrictions

40. Non-compliance with Alert Level requirements continues to contribute to the number of cases in the Waikato region. The soft boundaries pose compliance challenges as they introduce an extra layer of complexity to enforcement.
41. A move to stage one of the reduced Alert Level 3 will likely see increased movement within the Waikato, as was seen within the Auckland region, as households meet for limited outdoor gatherings and people are able to undertake more recreation. This increase in movement could also increase the risk of the wider community coming into contact with COVID-19 within public spaces.

Human Rights

42. Section 9(2)(h)

43. Section 9(2)(h)

Next Steps

44. Should you agree to move to stage one of Alert Level 3 settings in the Waikato, Parliamentary Council Office will prepare an amendment to the COVID-19 Public Health Response (Alert Level Requirements) Order (No 12) 2021 for your signature on Wednesday 27 October to come into effect at 11.59pm that day.
45. Under the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act, when you make or amend an Order under section 11 you must consult the Prime Minister, Minister of Justice, Minister of Health and any other Minister you consider relevant.
46. This consultation is able to take place at any time prior to the amendment Order being signed. However, officials advise it would be best practice to do so as part of the decision making process for this paper.

Consultation

47. The Ministry of Health provided the public health advice outlined in this paper. The Crown Law Office provided advice regarding the Bill of Rights Act implications. The Treasury, Te Puni Kōkiri, the Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Ethnic Communities and Ministry for Pacific People were consulted on the impacts of the keeping the Waikato in Alert Level 3.

Communications

48. It is recommended the decision on Waikato be announced at the 1pm press conference on Wednesday 27 October and be communicated in a press statement.