



Briefing

REVIEW OF ALERT LEVEL SETTINGS FOR THE WAIKATO ALERT LEVEL 3 AREA

To: Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

Date	21/10/2021	Priority	URGENT
Deadline	21/10/2021	Briefing Number	DPMC-2021/22-631

Purpose

This paper seeks agreement to keep the Waikato Alert Level 3 area (the Waikato) at Alert Level 3 until at least 11.59pm on 27 October 2021.

Recommendations


- Note** that since Tuesday 17 August 2021, 64 cases of COVID-19 have been identified in the Waikato region.
- Note** that in the 24 hours to 9am Thursday 21 October, 8 cases have been identified within the Waikato region.
- Note** that the public health risk assessment completed on Thursday 21 October assesses the risk of community transmission within Raglan, Te Awamutu area and the rest of the Waikato as Medium.
- Note** that the public health risk assessment recommends the Waikato Alert Level 3 area remain in Alert Level 3 until at least 11:59pm Wednesday 27 October 2021.
- Agree** to keep the Waikato Alert Level 3 area in Alert Level 3 until at least 11:59pm 27 October 2021.
- Agree** that Ministers next review the Alert Level for the Waikato Alert Level 3 area on Wednesday 27 October 2021.

YES / NO


YES / NO

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

YES / NO


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21 / 10 / 2021


 Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

21 / 10 / 21

Contact for telephone discussion if required:

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Minister's office comments:

- Noted
- Seen
- Approved
- Needs change
- Withdrawn
- Not seen by Minister
- Overtaken by events
- Referred to

REVIEW OF ALERT LEVEL SETTINGS FOR THE WAIKATO ALERT LEVEL 3 AREA

Purpose

1. This paper seeks your agreement to keep the Waikato at Alert Level 3 until at least 11.59pm Wednesday 27 October 2021. It also proposes that Ministers next review these settings on Wednesday 27 October.

Situation Report

2. As at 9am Thursday 21 October, there have been 2,260 confirmed cases detected since 17 August 2021, of which 64 are in the Waikato. There were 102 new cases identified in the community in the 24 hours to 9am Thursday 21 October, eight of which are in the Waikato.
3. The Public Health Risk Assessment completed on Thursday 21 October notes that there continues to be uncertainty about the number of cases in the Waikato. This is because cases continue to be detected that are unable to be immediately linked to known cases. The Ministry of Health therefore recommends that the Waikato remain at the Alert Level 3 for a further 7 days, until at least 11.59pm Wednesday 27 October.

Public Health Advice

4. Since 17 August 2021, there have been 64 cases identified in the Waikato, with eight cases reported in the 24 hours to 9:00am Thursday 21 October 2021 in Te Awamutu and Kihikihi (see map). A case in the Amohia Managed Isolation and Quarantine was admitted to hospital on Tuesday 19 October.
5. Most cases are in the Te Awamutu area (including Kihikihi) and Raglan, with two unlinked cases in Hamilton City.
- 6.
7. Waikato Public Health Unit report that there are major social challenges due to the complexity and vulnerable nature of cases and their contacts. Many of the recent cases, although contacts of known cases, are only being linked retrospectively.
8. Cases in Waikato are occurring in discrete socially and economically deprived communities within Te Awamutu and Kihikihi and often with alternative housing arrangements. Members often do not socialise externally but do socialise amongst themselves. However, given the challenges in contact tracing, this is difficult to define.
9. It has been several days since the last notification of cases in Hamilton City (Monday 18 October) and Raglan (Sunday 17 October). There is concern that there remain



[IN-CONFIDENCE]

undetected cases in Te Awamutu and in Raglan, with further cases expected, based on the behaviour and nature of cases to date.

Testing

10. Since parts of Waikato moved to Alert Level 3 on Sunday 3 October testing rates have been high, but there has been a drop off in testing in the last week to 17 October.

Table 1 – Testing from managed facilities and community by Waikato DHB over the past four weeks

Date	20/9 - 26/9	27/9 – 3/10	4-10 – 10/10	11/10 – 17/10
Total	9,343	8,292	24,621	20,153

11. In the past five days, over 13,000 community tests have been processed. Extra testing has been occurring in Kihikihi and Te Awamutu, but not yet at a sufficiently high number, and not of the population of concern.

Table 2 – Daily community tests completed by Waikato DHB as at 6.15am on 21 October 2021

Date	Saturday 16/10	Sunday 17/10	Monday 18/10	Tuesday 19/10	Wednesday 20/10
Total	4,161	2,881	1,730	2,700	3,883
Per 1000 population	9.7	6.7	4	6.3	9

Wastewater results

12. As of Wednesday 20 October, COVID-19 has been detected in wastewater samples in:
- Te Awamutu on Tuesday 19 October following detections on Friday 15 October, Wednesday 13 October, and Tuesday 12 October. This is not unexpected given known cases in the area.
 - Hamilton on Tuesday 19 October and Thursday 14 October, but not detected in samples taken on Monday 18 October.
 - Raglan on a sustained basis since Monday 4 October. There are known recovered cases that have returned to the Raglan area.
13. There have not yet been any further wastewater sample results from other areas of the Waikato. Results of samples collected from Kihikihi are expected on Friday 22 October. These samples cover approximately half of the streets in Kihikihi.

Vaccination rates in Waikato

14. As of 11:59pm 20 October 2021, overall Waikato vaccination rates are just below the national average (86 percent first dose and 68 percent second dose), with 84 percent of the eligible Waikato population having had one dose and 66 percent with two doses.
- Yesterday, 1,058 first doses and 2,218 second doses were given in Waikato. Just over a third of these first doses went to Māori.

[IN-CONFIDENCE]

- b) 68 percent of Waikato's eligible Māori population have had one dose, 45 percent have two doses. This is similar to the national average for Māori (67 percent first dose and 46 percent with two doses).
- c) 82 percent of Waikato's eligible Pacific population have had one dose, 62 percent are fully vaccinated. This is similar to the national average for Pacific peoples (81 percent first dose and 61 percent with two doses).

Table 3 - Vaccination uptake by key ethnicities as at 11:59pm on 20 October 2021

Dose	First			Second		
	Māori	Pacific Peoples	All ethnicities	Māori	Pacific Peoples	All ethnicities
Waikato	68%	82%	84%	45%	62%	66%
New Zealand	67%	81%	86%	46%	61%	68%

Public health risk assessment of community transmission

- 15. Because most cases are being linked retrospectively to cases, it is likely that there is undetected community transmission in Te Awamutu and the 'edges' of this outbreak have not been identified.
- 16. Although there has not been a case in Raglan since Sunday 17 October and in Hamilton City since Monday 18 October, there may still be some undetected community transmission considering the nature of the community affected and that all contacts may not have been identified.
- 17. Wastewater results from towns surrounding Te Awamutu will provide reassurance that there is no further spread through Waikato.
- 18. Taking the above into account and to today's PHRA, the risk of community transmission in Raglan, the Te Awamutu area and the rest of Waikato is now MEDIUM.

Public health recommendations

- 19. Based on today's Public Health Risk Assessment, the Ministry of Health has recommended that the current Waikato Alert Level 3 restrictions should remain until at least 11.59pm on Wednesday 27 October 2021, with a review of the Public Health Risk Assessment on Tuesday 26 October 2021.
- 20. At the same time the Ministry of Health recommends there needs to be:
 - a) Increased COVID-19 safety messaging for people undertaking permitted movement within and between Alert Levels, e.g. the need to take your Alert Level with you and to wear a face covering.
 - b) Reinforcement of the messaging around the Alert Level 3 requirements and the importance of limiting movement across the region, particularly during the upcoming Labour weekend.

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Rationale for retaining current restrictions for an additional period

21. Given the nature and circumstances of the new Waikato cases, we are not confident that all the chains of transmission have been captured in recent testing, especially since many people in the communities of concern have been reluctant to get tested or disclose contacts. As such, we cannot determine the edges of the outbreak. Additional time to conduct further wastewater testing in affected communities is needed to better understand the extent of spread.
22. The Ministry of Health expects a number cases will emerge over the next few days in the Te Awamutu and Kihikihi area. This area is very hard to ringfence since there are many roads in and out of the area. Consequently, we are not confident the area can be isolated from the rest of the Waikato.
23. In absence of full information, in terms of understanding the movements of recent cases and their contacts, many cases seem to be relatively confined to their local communities and networks. However, some cases or their contacts are likely to have been to other areas within the Waikato region. This means we could see further geographic spread of cases and supports the continued need for widespread restrictions rather than targeted lockdowns.
24. Many of the cases have materialised due to people not complying with Alert Level 3 requirements. It is unlikely these people would comply with more stringent restrictions (i.e. Alert Level 4), but the current Alert Level 3 restrictions are protecting wider communities in the Waikato region from further spread of the virus. Retaining the current restrictions will protect the rest of the region who have been following the rules while allowing time for vaccination rates to increase.
25. Furthermore, the Ministry of Health is concerned about the potential for spread if the restrictions are relaxed before Labour weekend, given a significant degree of movement would be expected.

Proposal regarding Alert Levels

26. On the basis of the public health risk assessment officials recommended:
 - a) the Waikato Alert Level 3 area remains at Alert Level 3 until at least 11:59 Wednesday 27 October 2021; and
 - b) these settings are reviewed by COVID-19 Ministers on Wednesday 27 October.

Impacts of the proposal to remain at Alert Level 3

27. 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

28. 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 and Northland, AL2 rest of country	\$300 million	5% of national GDP
AL4 across all of NZ	\$1,520 million	25% of national GDP

29. The Waikato region has not seen any major increase in food grants because of the move to Alert Level 3 on 3 October. In the last week the Waikato region was receiving 12 percent of all food grants nationally, which comparable to the week prior to the national lockdown in August 2021.

Impacts on at-risk populations

30. Impacts noted in previous Alert Level reviews of all New Zealand also apply 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.
31. Additional attention is now being paid to the impacts ongoing serious health issues for Māori that have been delayed because of the attention of the health sector to the pandemic.
32. In addition to the above, consultation with agencies on the proposals in this paper has raised the following population impacts for the Waikato region:
- 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.

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.

- b) Māori vaccination rates increased as a result of Super Saturday, however there are still many unvaccinated Māori in Waikato, particularly in rural communities. Waikato, Raukawa, Hauraki and Maniapoto iwi leaders will be meeting with key Ministers in the coming week about equitable Māori health provider resources, to increase the vaccination uptake for Māori communities. Te Puni Kōkiri is providing support to impacted businesses (through the Whānau Recovery Fund).

Public attitudes and compliance

33. Social conversation analysis has seen social media commentary (on non-Unite Against COVID-19 channels) 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.
34. Police report that between 6 September and 19 October, a total of 7,465 vehicles have been turned around at the southern Alert Level boundary checkpoints.

Ability to operationalise Alert Level restrictions

35. 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 to enable intra- and inter-regional travel especially in the smaller rural communities of Raglan, Te Awamutu and Kihikihi.

Human Rights

36. Section 9(2)(h)

37. Section 9(2)(h)

Next Steps

38. 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. While the proposal to keep the Waikato Alert Level 3 area at Alert Level 3 does not require amending the current Order, officials advise it would be best practice to do so.
39. Officials will provide further advice to inform Ministers decision making regarding the Waikato Alert Level 3 area on 27 October 2021.

Consultation

40. The Ministry of Health provided the specific public health advice outlined in this paper. The Crown Law Office provided advice regarding the Bill of Rights Act implication of this

public health advice. The Treasury, Te Puni Kōkiri, the Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Ethnic Communities, and Ministry for Pacific People provided content on the impacts of the proposal.

Communications

41. It is recommended the Minister for COVID-19 Response release a statement communicating this decision this evening.