

23 September 2021

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response
Parliament Building
WELLINGTON

Dear Minister Hipkins

Observations from the Recent Delta Outbreak and their Impact on Reconnecting New Zealanders

The current Delta outbreak has, to a significant extent, exposed urgent issues with respect to New Zealand's preparedness for reconnecting. It has also highlighted a degree of fragility around the License to Operate – the goodwill and tolerance of the general public to lockdowns and the closure of the borders is being challenged.

Delta has fundamentally changed the model of preparedness and response and we must adapt accordingly. We do not have a do nothing option. The world is adapting and changing quickly – we must remain involved and connected to those developments.

Re-opening will, despite our best intentions, lead to more incursions of the virus. High vaccinations rates are a critical first line of defence. Vaccines however are only one element of interdependent system that requires four key layers of defence and response:

- Vaccination
- Border processes
- Public health measures
- Health system safety net.

For each of these layers, there are pre-conditions that need to be met prior to reopening.

Vaccination - Vaccination coverage will need to be well over 90% and it is clear that our New Zealand vaccination programme is failing certain populations, most notably Māori, who are at higher risk of serious disease and death than non-Māori. Addressing such disparities is an urgent priority. We would also recommend looking to address any impediments to the vaccination programme such as funding.

Border Processes – It is essential that we safely enable greater freedom of movement across our international border – to address escalating economic and social harms. There are a number of critical issues at the border the need to be addressed including the need for verification of vaccine status, a coherent and fit-for-purpose plan for alternatives to the current MIQ system, and there needs to be a breakthrough to enable saliva testing and rapid antigen testing to be rolled out widely as soon as possible.

Public Health Measures - The systems we adopt for interventions such as surveillance, testing, and contact tracing need to be bolstered. This has been the subject of recurring recommendations from our reports and needs to be addressed as a priority. In addition, ongoing issues with innovation around testing and electronic contact tracing enhancement need to be resolved. Rapid antigen testing is a critical prerequisite – we cannot afford the delays in its introduction that have been experienced with saliva testing.

Health System Safety Net - The current outbreak has revealed the very poor level of preparedness of hospitals for Delta. The system's ability to deal with Delta and other business as usual functions of the health system has been found wanting. A full readiness assessment of the health system against agreed metrics for key preconditions should be part of the decision-making framework for phased reopening with a particular focus on workforce, diagnostic tools and infrastructure.

The current Delta outbreak has exposed the shortfall in proper engagement of Māori and Pacific providers in the outbreak and overall response while it has also exposed the huge potential of proper engagement even when done at pace. Optimising engagement is an urgent priority.

Operating model - In keeping with our previous and recent recommendations, we are convinced that the strategic oversight, inter-agency connectedness and leadership of the COVID-19 response need to be reconfigured under a fit-for-purpose COVID-19 agency/response unit that is able to better anticipate rather than being primarily in a state of reactivity. The current operating model is failing and will fail in the even more complex operating environment after Re-opening.

A fully integrated pandemic preparedness and response unit (the Unit) will enable all other government and health system functions to perform normally and to focus on their business as usual.

We recommend that this unit is put in place before the end of the vaccination rollout as the current arrangements put the country at unnecessary risk. The Unit should encompass an accountability for the planning and integration of the items in the assurance framework.

While we have seen immense effort and progress in our COVID-19 journey, there is still a substantial programme of work needed to be prepared for the challenges that we face, particularly as we move towards a phased reopening of borders in an uncertain and everchanging world. Attached to this letter is a report that sets out, what is in our view, the necessary preconditions for a phased reopening. These must be considered as a collective and coherent set of actions resting under a single point of accountability, and not divided up across the system as a collection of singular recommendations. How we organise ourselves and take forward the necessary body of work is crucial.

Yours sincerely



Sir Brian Roche

Chair of the COVID-19 Independent Continuous Review, Improvement and Advice Group