

NEW ZEALAND

Covid 19 coronavirus: Auckland back to level 2, New Zealand to level 1 as restrictions ease

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The Government is reviewing whether its communications during the latest Auckland cluster were too complicated - including the advice for "close contacts" and "casual-plus contacts".

The review comes as Auckland and the rest of New Zealand have extra reason to celebrate the lowering of alert levels today - there are no new community cases overnight.

It is the seventh day in a row that there have been no overnight cases, although Covid Response Minister Chris Hipkins said there would likely be more managed isolation cases.

"It would appear to be contained at the moment - I never want to speak too soon. I've learned from experience never to say it's all over before it is actually all over but at this point it's looking pretty good," Hipkins told Newstalk ZB's Francesca Rudkin.

Hipkins revealed the Government was reviewing whether some of the public advice was too complicated, following claims from some people they had received mixed messages about whether they should be self-isolating.

In one case, a woman went to work at KFC, saying she had been told she did not have to isolate - and later tested positive for Covid. The woman's actions raised the ire of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern.

"It is a constant learning exercise and we will now have the opportunity to sort of do a bit of a debrief and say okay what did we do well [and] if we had to do this again what would we do differently?" Hipkins told Newstalk ZB.

"We do that after every community outbreak that we deal with and every incident that we deal with. Every time we we do things a little bit differently and we get a little bit better.

"This time we did rely more heavily on our contact-tracing system rather than lockdown so we had a very short, sharp lockdown, and then put the emphasis back on our contact tracing system.

"It was clear that not all of the information that our contact tracers needed...they didn't get it all. And that created an added complexity."

Rudkin asked him if people had received clear advice and communication.

"One of the things we did [in] this current community outbreak is we had additional kind of layers - so we've had the casual plus and the close contact plus categories. So one of the things that we will go back and look at now is did that work? Was that too complicated for people? Would we do that again if we were in the position again? We will go back and have a look at that."

Meanwhile, excited Aucklanders have burst their bubbles this morning with coffee catch-ups, brunches and trips out of the city after a week cooped up under tough Covid-19 restrictions.

And life is returning to normal across the rest of the nation as level-2 restrictions give way to the freedom of level 1 life.

The nation's biggest city exited its alert level-3 Covid lockdown at 6am and moves into an alert level 2 stance that allows diners and shoppers back into stores and friends and groups to meet those they don't live with.

Auckland's weather isn't exactly joining in on the fanfare, though, with cloudy periods leading into afternoon rain and a high of 22C.

Wellington residents, meanwhile, can expect rainy spells and a top of 20C today, while Christchurch residents, in the South Island, are set for showers beginning at midday that could turn heavy.

Dubbed by some pundits as "the least-loved lockdown" yet, Auckland's week-long level 3 shutdown was brought on by Covid-exposed contacts breaking the rules and not isolating properly.

Sam Jambu, the manager of Boy & Bird eatery, said each day of lockdown made it harder for businesses to bounce back and that he'd never seen the Ponsonby Rd restaurant strip so quiet.

"Business is down, but with the move to alert level 2 tomorrow, we're hoping it will pick back up," he said.

Adding to a sense among some Aucklanders that they could have returned to lesser restrictions quicker was the fact New Zealand reported six days running - including yesterday - with no new Covid community cases.

There were fears among some pundits that Aucklanders might disobey social distancing rules on Saturday - the last day of alert level 3.

However, drizzling rain helped dampen the idea that city beaches like Takapuna Beach in the North Shore would be flooded with congregating Aucklanders.

Instead, only small bunches of people could be seen on Takapuna Beach's sands today, with puppies and children straggling behind.

Most appeared to be keeping to their bubbles.

Most busy was the action out on the water. At least 30 wind- and kitesurfers swept across waters in front of the beach, riding the breeze as Rangitoto Island rested behind.

Overall, police received 936 notifications to 105 possible level 3 restriction breaches between February 28 and last Friday, March 5.

Today, meanwhile, should be busier as Aucklanders were able to return to work and school, eat out at restaurants, move outside their bubbles, return to gyms, hair salons and nail bars.

Yet restrictions remained.

No more than 100 people were allowed at sports events, church services and social gatherings, including weddings, birthdays, funerals and tangihanga.

Businesses could open, but they legally must follow public health rules. These included physical distancing and record keeping.

Everyone — workers, contractors and customers — with cold, flu or Covid-19 symptoms should also stay home, health teams said.

And experts reminded Aucklanders they should take their alert level precautions with them and be extra cautious if they choose to leave the city today.

Exactly what sparked the Papatoetoe High School cluster - and Auckland's lockdown - still remains a mystery.

So too does the exact origins of the pandemic, which has wreaked havoc across the world for more than year now.

Some answers may be revealed as the World Health Organisation announced it would release its report into the source of the Covid-19 outbreak within the next two weeks.

Hipkins on vaccine rollout

Covid Response Minister Chris Hipkins has appeared on TVNZ's Q+A today, answering questions on a number of issues in relation to New Zealand's pandemic response.

He said the leave support scheme was designed to be an additional support for businesses. "The reality is now it is smaller, we are not proposing any changes but we are not ruling that out."

He said the scheme had become a huge cost to taxpayers and the Government needed to balance that with supporting businesses. "We are also asking employers to be playing their part as well."

Meanwhile, on the issue of contact tracing, Hipkins said Immigration NZ would not be given any information obtained from the system.

The Government only used the information for contact tracing and only kept it for a short period of time, he said. If there was no public interest information obtained from contact tracing then the Government did not share that information.

On the vaccine rollout plan, Hipkins said the Government had been working with the private sector - it was a big part of the rollout.

Not all vaccines were as effective in different population groups - for example, some were not as suitable for over-65-year-olds as others, Hipkins said.

One of the challenges was that the science was still evolving, he said.

"We want to make sure that information is as reliable as possible," he said.

"One of the things we are working through is the sequence making up and learning which vaccines are suitable for who," he said.

As we get to a position where vaccines are part of the global picture, that would have an impact on our border control, Hipkins said.

On vaccine passports, he said: "New Zealand is actively involved in vaccine passports, it's almost an inevitability."

Hipkins said passports could be available in New Zealand within the next year.

He said it didn't mean all Kiwis had to be vaccinated before we introduced vaccine passports.

Hipkins could not confirm if a trans-Tasman bubble would happen by the end of the month. "We will give certainty as soon as we can," Hipkins said.

The NZ Covid Tracer now has 2,736,807 registered users. This is an increase of more than 68,000 users in the past 14 days.

Poster scans have reached 209,842,881, users have created 8,247,078 manual diary entries. There have been 1,496,777 scans in the last 24 hours.
