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Making the border stronger



HON CHRIS HIPKINS(/MINISTER/HON-CHRIS-HIPKINS)

COVID-19 Response (/portfolio/labour-2020-2023/covid-19-response)

- New 'very high risk' country designation
- Returnees to be cohorted into MIQs

The Government is taking significant additional steps to make our borders even safer, COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins announced today.

"New Zealand is in a strong position and Kiwis enjoy freedoms most other countries do not have, thanks to the efforts of the team of five million. But as the Government has always said, we will continue to look for ways to improve and refine our approach, based on evidence and risk," Chris Hipkins said.

"In the latest stage of evolution at the border, the Government has created a new 'very high risk country' category that will significantly reduce the number of infected people flying to New Zealand.

"This is in response to rapidly increasing rates of infection in parts of the globe and based on what is happening in the country, the prevalence of COVID-19 variants of concern, the public health measures the country has in place and the risk to our border.

"The new category comes into force from 11.59pm on 28 April. Countries have initially been designated very high risk where there have been more than 50 cases of COVID-19 per 1000 arrivals to New Zealand from those countries in 2021, and where there are more than 15 travellers on average per month.

“India, Brazil, Papua New Guinea and Pakistan are the countries that currently meet that threshold, and as a result, travellers from those countries will be temporarily restricted to New Zealand citizens, their partners and children, and parents of children who are New Zealand citizens.”

“From India alone, this is expected to reduce the number of potential positive cases coming to New Zealand by an estimated 75%.”

“All travellers from very high risk countries will require evidence of a negative PCR test from an accredited laboratory within 72 hours prior to travel.”

“I want to stress this was not an easy decision. It was based entirely on current risk assessment and will be reviewed regularly.”

“There will be an exceptions process on humanitarian grounds.”

“All other travellers, including residents, will be required to have been outside of the very high risk country for at least 14 days before flying to New Zealand.”

Officials will continue to develop the very high risk country framework, and we will provide an update in May on the process for adding new countries to the list, and for removing countries from it.

Cohorting

“As previously indicated, the introduction of the Trans-Tasman bubble has provided us the opportunity to rethink our approach to how we manage returnees,” COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said.

“Even after 500 rooms are held back for contingency, the availability of the remaining 500 to 800 rooms freed up by the bubble has given us options to manage risk in ways that were not previously available.”

“We said releasing these rooms on a one for one basis for people from higher risk countries was not an option. It would increase risk in the MIQs overall.”

“Today I can confirm most MIQs are introducing an enhanced cohorting (or group intake) system to further reduce risk of in-facility transmission.”

“Under the new plan, returnees arriving in New Zealand over a 96-hour window will be delivered to MIQ facilities until they are full or the 96-hour period is over.”

“The facilities will then ‘lock down’ for a 14-day cycle with no additional returnees allowed until after the last of the cohort have completed their stay and the facilities have been cleaned.”

“This will ensure returnees will be in the same facility as others who have arrived at about the same time, and importantly, will keep those who have just arrived apart from those who are coming to the end of their stay. The Pullman Hotel will be the first managed isolation facility to receive cohorted arrivals, starting tomorrow. The transition will be complete by Sunday, 16 May.”

“Day 0/1 testing, staying in their room until a negative result is returned, Days 3 and 12 testing, limited exposure to others when exercising and smoking, and physical distancing will continue to apply across all facilities.”

Chris Hipkins said the number of available rooms will be temporarily reduced by bringing forward scheduled hotel maintenance to April-May from July-September. However, thousands of rooms will be freed up to the end of May by MIQ cancelling all remaining vouchers held by travellers from Australia.

Note:

Special purpose MIQ facilities will not be included in cohorting. This includes the JetPark quarantine facility and other facilities used for special groups such as refugees, unaccompanied minors, air and maritime crew and people with complex medical needs.

The emptying process to transition to enhanced cohorting has already started, with five facilities no longer receiving new returnees to prepare them to receive a cohort of arrivals.



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