

Memo

Public health advice on Alert Level settings for Northland and Auckland – 7 November

To:	Dr Ashley Bloomfield, Director-General of Health
Copy to:	Bridget White, Deputy Chief Executive, COVID-19 Health System Response
From:	Angela Hassan-Sharp, Group Manager, COVID-19 Policy Response Dr Caroline McElnay, Director of Public Health
Date:	7 November 2021
For your:	Decision

Purpose of report

1. This memo provides public health advice for Alert Level settings in Northland and Auckland.

Context

2. As at 2pm on Sunday 7 November, there are four Alert Level settings across New Zealand:
 - a. Auckland is at Alert Level 3 Step 1 (with a shift to Step 2 scheduled for Tuesday 9 November).
 - b. Upper Northland is at Alert Level 3, to be reviewed on Monday 8 November.
 - c. Parts of Waikato (including Waitomo District, Waipa District, Ōtorohanga District, Raglan, Te Kauwhata, Huntly, Ngāruawāhia, Hamilton City and some surrounding areas) are at Alert Level 3 Step 2 until at least Monday 15 November.
 - d. The rest of New Zealand is at Alert Level 2.
3. New cases continue to be notified across the top half of the North Island. As of 9:30am on Sunday 7 November:
 - a. One new case was notified in Upper Northland. The case was an expected household close contact of another case. There are now 18 total cases in Northland, seven are in isolation and the rest recovered.
 - b. There continues to be high numbers of daily new cases in Auckland, including 109 new cases notified today following a record high of 194 on Saturday 6 November.

- c. Two new cases were notified in parts of Waikato (Hamilton and Ōtorohanga), bringing the total number of cases to 156, with 86 recoveries.
4. There have also been recent unexpected wastewater detections in Taranaki, Napier, and Gisborne, the sources of which have yet to be identified. More will be known once follow up testing results are returned on Monday 8 November.

Public Health Risk Assessment

5. A public health risk assessment (PHRA) for Northland was conducted at 9:30am on Sunday 7 November. The PHRA also considered whether any changes were necessary to the advice provided on Friday 5 November on Alert Level settings for Auckland.

Northland outbreak overview

While there are new cases in Upper Northland, they are linked and isolated



- 6. As at 9:30am Sunday 7 November, there are 18 cases, in three genomically distinct Northland clusters.
- 7. There are seven active cases in Northland, and all are in home isolation. Eleven cases have now recovered, including all cases in Kaipara.
- 8. Vaccination statuses of the cases have varied with most cases not vaccinated (eight cases or 44 percent). Four cases (22 percent) had one dose, and only one case (six percent) was fully vaccinated. Five cases (28 percent) were under 12-years of age and not eligible for vaccination.
- 9. Whole genome sequencing (WGS) strongly suggest that the Northland clusters represent multiple introductions from Auckland, but there is yet to be an epi-link made.
- 10. More WGS information is provided in Appendix One.

Locations of interest and contact tracing

- 11. There are 13 locations of interest identified in Northland.
- 12. The Awanui Hotel is a known exposure site with multiple cases being detected. All contacts (approximately 13) associated with the Awanui Hotel are being treated as close contacts.
- 13. There are 57 close contacts in isolation and the Public Health Unit is undertaking regular testing and monitoring of symptoms.

Northland testing rates remain high and have increased since the move to Alert Level 3

- 14. Over the past seven days, testing rates in Northland have been amongst the highest in the country, varying between 5.6 and 12 people per 1,000 population. In the past seven days, there has been 8,208 tests, with a seven-day average of 1,172 tests per day.
- 15. Testing rates around Kaitaia have also increased since the move to Alert Level 3 on Tuesday 2 November, with rates increasing from the mid-30s per 1,000 population to the mid-70s to 80s per 1,000. This has provided a greater level of assurance that there is no undetected community transmission in that area.

16. Of the 1,178 tests on Friday 5 November, 886 (75.29 percent) have been processed and all results are negative. 281 (23.9 percent) are pending, and eleven (0.9 percent) were faulty.

Table 1 - Number of community tests completed by Northland DHB as of Sunday 7 November

Measure	Tuesday 2/11	Wednesday 3/11	Thursday 4/11	Friday 5/11	Saturday 6/11
Per 1000	5.6	10.3	8.6	10.0	12.0
Total	1,092	1,987	1,656	1,935	2,316

17. While there remains an overall lag on testing results in Northland, all swabs from symptomatic people from Kaitaia and close contacts are being tested on a rapid testing platform. This has ensured that the most high-risk tests are being completed within 24 hours, which does not greatly increase the risk regarding delays in testing turnaround.
18. Further localised testing results are in Appendix One.

Wastewater testing is limited, but there have been no unexpected wastewater detections

19. Approximately 60 percent of properties in the Northland region are using septic tanks, and thus are not captured by wastewater testing.
20. The virus was detected in a sample from Opononi on Thursday 4 November. It was not detected in a sample from Rawene on Thursday 4 November following detections on Tuesday 26 and Thursday 28 October, and Tuesday 2 November.
21. There are continued non-detections at all other sites, including Kaitaia, with the most recent samples taken on Thursday 4 November. Further results are expected on Tuesday 9 November.

Vaccination rates in Northland remain low but are increasing

22. Relative to the rest of the New Zealand, Northland vaccination rates remain particularly low, which raises ongoing concerns about the vulnerability of the population to continuing COVID-19 transmission.

Table 2 - Vaccine uptake by key ethnicities within Northland DHB 11:59pm Saturday 6 November

	First dose			Second dose		
	Māori	Pacific	All ethnicities	Māori	Pacific	All ethnicities
Northland	70%	83%	81%	52%	65%	68%
New Zealand	74%	87%	89%	57%	72%	78%

23. As shown in the table below, Northland vaccination rates remain comparably lower to the national average in most age groups.

Table 3 - Vaccination rates by age group as of 11:59pm Saturday 6 November

Age group	First dose					Second dose				
	12-19	20 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 64	65+	12-19	20 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 64	65+
Northland	70%	68%	78%	85%	94%	48%	47%	63%	77%	90%
New Zealand	84%	85%	88%	91%	96%	65%	68%	77%	85%	93%

24. Since the last PHRA for Northland on Tuesday 2 November first dose vaccination rates in Northland have increased by two percent overall, three percent for Māori, and two percent for Pacific peoples. Overall second dose vaccination rates have increased by three percent, four percent for Māori, and three percent for Pacific peoples.
25. There are nine Māori health providers, providing both static and mobile outreach clinics across Northland. That is in addition to 19 general practices, 11 pharmacies, five Northland DHB community clinics, and nine mobile outreach clinics.

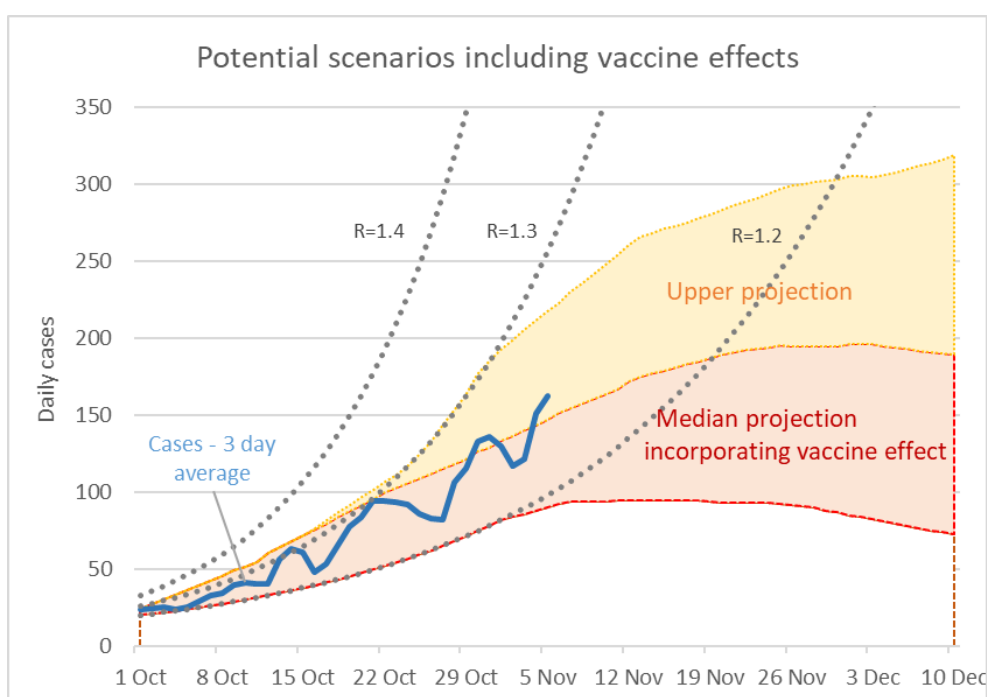
Northland's health system capacity is currently adequate

26. Health services in Northland can meet the requirements of the current outbreak in the region. However, a significant escalation in case numbers and hospitalisations would strain the capacity of health services.

Auckland

27. Today's PHRA confirmed the advice provided following the PHRA conducted on Friday 5 November that Auckland can move to Alert Level 3 Step 2, cognisant of concerns about the expected trajectory of cases and the need to progress key work.
28. Northern Regional Health Coordination Centre (NRHCC) noted that case numbers in Auckland are now tracking into the upper projections of modelling, which assumed of no further relaxation of restrictions in Alert Levels in Auckland.

Figure 1 - Potential future scenarios; cases as at 9am Sunday 7 November - NRHCC modelling



29. While NRHCC accept that Auckland will shift to Alert Level 3 Step 2, from a purely risk assessment point of view, they are concerned about the ongoing rise in case numbers and the impact this is having and will have on the wider health system.
30. It was again noted that the new community care model is under pressure in Auckland and is still being developed. In addition to managing increasing numbers of cases through the community care model, Auckland public health officials' ability to implement the processes and coordinate the new providers that are required under the model are hampered because an IT system to support the model is still being built. It is expected that the system will be more stable in the next two to three days.

Public health advice and recommendations

31. Today's PHRA concluded that **the risk of undetected community transmission is now LOW in Upper Northland and remains LOW for the rest of Northland.**
32. Based on the PHRA, and the information available, our recommendations are that:
 - a. Upper Northland should move Alert Level 2 at 11:59pm on Tuesday 9 November
 - b. Northland should remain at Alert Level 2
 - c. Auckland can move to Alert Level 3 Step 2 in line with advice provided to you on Friday 5 November and noting the concerns regarding the pressure on and ongoing development of the case management and care in the community programme in Auckland.
 - d. Alert Level settings for Northland will remain under regular consideration and a further PHRA will be conducted only if required.
33. From a public health perspective, these recommendations are proportionate to the risk of transmission of COVID-19, given the level of risk for communities in these areas.

Rationale - Northland

34. From a public health perspective, there is no evidence of undetected community transmission in Northland. The risk of onwards transmission appears to be under control and limited to close contacts who are all in isolation. The overall risk in Northland continues to be considered low as the cases largely contained in three small clusters.
35. While the source or clear link for the index case in upper Northland has not been found, there has been a significant amount of testing in Northland since the move to Alert Level 3 on Tuesday 2 November.
36. In the past seven-days there have been 8210 tests completed, averaging around 1000 a day. Northland DHB report that the testing rate in the Far North has tripled (with approximately 10-15 percent of the population tested) and doubled overall for Northland. In Taipa alone, approximately 10 percent of the population has been tested. Ongoing testing will continue across Northland regardless of the Alert Level settings.
37. Beyond the index case, if there were widespread community transmission, it is likely to have been identified based on the amount of testing completed. There also continues to be no unexpected wastewater detections in Kaitaia.

38. One of the objectives of the shift to Alert Level 3 was to increase testing and vaccination rates in Northland. However, while there has been a reassuring increase in testing rates, the rate of increase in vaccination has not been as high. Noting that the risk of onward transmission is low, it would not be appropriate or justifiable to keep Northland at Alert Level 3 only to increase vaccination rates.

Equity

39. The Northland region has a high Māori population with a low vaccination rate. An outbreak in Northland is likely to have disproportionate impacts on local Māori communities, particularly those in rural or remote areas.
40. Insights from the sector have indicated that Māori service providers are particularly stretched in Auckland. Non-Māori primary care, service providers, and DHBs will need to support Māori service providers with any additional outreach programmes.
41. Vaccination rates among at-risk communities need to increase. Additional resources and focus are being given to vaccination efforts in these communities, including targeted outreach / mobile vaccination services.

New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (Crown Law Office)

42. Moving Upper Northland from Alert Level 3 to Alert Level 2 is less limiting on the rights affirmed by the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (NZBORA) rights of freedom of movement and peaceful assembly for persons in those areas. They are more consistent with the NZBORA than the previous settings for that reason.
43. The restrictions imposed at Alert Level 2 must themselves be necessary and proportionate to prevent or limit the risk of, the outbreak or spread of any COVID-19 Delta outbreak.
44. s 9(2)(h) [REDACTED]
45. Maintaining the rest of Northland at Alert Level 2 must also be necessary and proportionate to prevent or limit the risk of, the outbreak or spread of this COVID-19 Delta outbreak. Given the public health risk for Northland is low but not non-existent, the restrictions on rights brought about by Alert Level 2 are likely to be justified under NZBORA, particularly given the relatively low vaccination rates in the area.

Recommendations

We recommend that you:

- a) **Note** that a public health risk assessment for Northland and Auckland was **Noted** undertaken on Sunday 7 November 2021.
- b) **Note** that the risk of undetected community transmission

- i. is now LOW in Upper Northland. **Noted**
- ii. remains LOW in the rest of Northland. **Noted**
- iii. remains HIGH in Auckland. **Noted**
- c) **Note** that the public health risk assessment confirmed the advice provided to you Friday 5 November on Alert Level settings for Auckland remain unchanged and that Auckland can move to Alert Level 3 Step 2. **Noted**
- d) **Note** the concerns regarding the current pressure on and ongoing development of the case management and care in the community programme in Auckland. **Noted**
- e) **Agree** that Upper Northland can move to Alert Level 2 from at 11:59pm on Tuesday 9 November, pending no unexpected developments. **Yes**
- f) **Agree** that the rest of Northland remain at Alert Level 2. **Yes**
- g) **Agree** that Northland will remain under regular consideration and a further public health risk assessment will be conducted only if required. **Yes**
- h) **Agree** to forward this advice to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. **Yes**

Signature



Date: 7 November 2021

Dr Ashley Bloomfield
Te Tumu Whakarae mō te Hauora
Director-General of Health

Appendix One

Localised Northland testing data

46. Testing rates have increased in the area concern (Kaitaia)

Table 4 - Far North total testing numbers for the past seven days Saturday 6 November

Area	Tested	Population	Rate per 1,000
North Cape	236	1,735	136
Rangaunu Harbour	231	2,292	101
Ahipara	118	1,278	92
Kaitaia East	220	2,586	85
Tangonge	95	1,148	83
Rangitahi	65	885	73
Kaitaia West	267	3,740	71
Peria	86	1,227	70
Kohukohu-Broadwood	53	760	70
Herekino-Takahue	65	977	67
Omahuta Forest-Horeke	67	1,155	58
Hokianga North	48	905	53
Waipoua Forest	63	1,216	52
Hokianga South	59	1,301	45
Ngapuhi	66	1,503	44
Ohaeawai-Waimate North	48	1,230	39
Okaihau	37	1,149	32
Kaikohe	138	4,716	29
Waima Forest	31	1,136	27
Kaipara Coastal	100	3,708	27

Northland whole genome sequencing update

47. The Northland cases sequenced to date form three genomic clusters:

- a. First, 21-408609-WH, 21-408610-WH, 21-408726-WH, 21-408724-WH and 21-408821-WH genomically linked to 21-408268-AK.
- b. Second, 21-409555-WH which is genomically linked to four other Auckland cases, 21-407936-AK, 21-408152-AK, 21-408858-AK and 21-407674-AK.

- c. Third, 21-410062-WH is genomically linked to the backbone of a large and active genomic cluster which includes cases from several epidemiological subclusters (C-0064, C-0071, C-0073 and RHF households) as well as several cases from Auckland that are not linked to epidemiological subclusters (including cases 21-406891-AK and 21-407365-AK, two Auckland cases that are known to have visited Northland).
- d. Given the number of cases in this part of the tree it is not possible to identify a particular genomic link for these cases. Case 21-410253-WH (a household contact of 21-410062-WH carries one additional SNP compared with 21-40062-WH, supporting the epidemiological evidence that 21-410062-WH was the likely source of infection for this case.