

# Memo

## Public health advice on Alert Level settings – 28 October 2021

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**To:** Dr Ashley Bloomfield, Director-General of Health

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**Copy to:** Bridget White, Deputy Chief Executive, COVID-19 Health System Response

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**From:** Maree Roberts, Deputy Director-General, System Strategy and Policy  
Dr Caroline McElnay, Director of Public Health

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**Date:** 28 October 2021

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**For your:** Decision

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### Purpose of report

1. This memo provides you with public health advice on COVID-19 Alert Level settings for Auckland, Christchurch, and the rest of New Zealand (excluding parts of Waikato that are currently at Alert Level 3 Step 1).

### Context

2. As of Thursday 28 October 2021, New Zealand has two Alert Level settings:
  - a. Auckland and 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 1.
  - b. The rest of the country is at Alert Level 2.
3. There continues to be community transmission in Auckland, with 2,793 total cases. There are seven cases in Northland, 101 cases in Waikato, of which most are linked to the Auckland outbreak. A case was notified in Blenheim on Friday 22 October linked to the Waikato cluster. Two new cases in Christchurch within one household were notified late on Wednesday 27 October.

### Public Health Risk Assessment

4. A public health risk assessment (PHRA) for Auckland, Christchurch, and the rest of New Zealand (excluding parts of Waikato that are at Alert Level 3 Step 1) was conducted at 9:30am on Thursday 28 October 2021 and considered the following factors:
  - a. trends in the daily number of cases
  - b. contact tracing data
  - c. the number and characteristics of unlinked cases

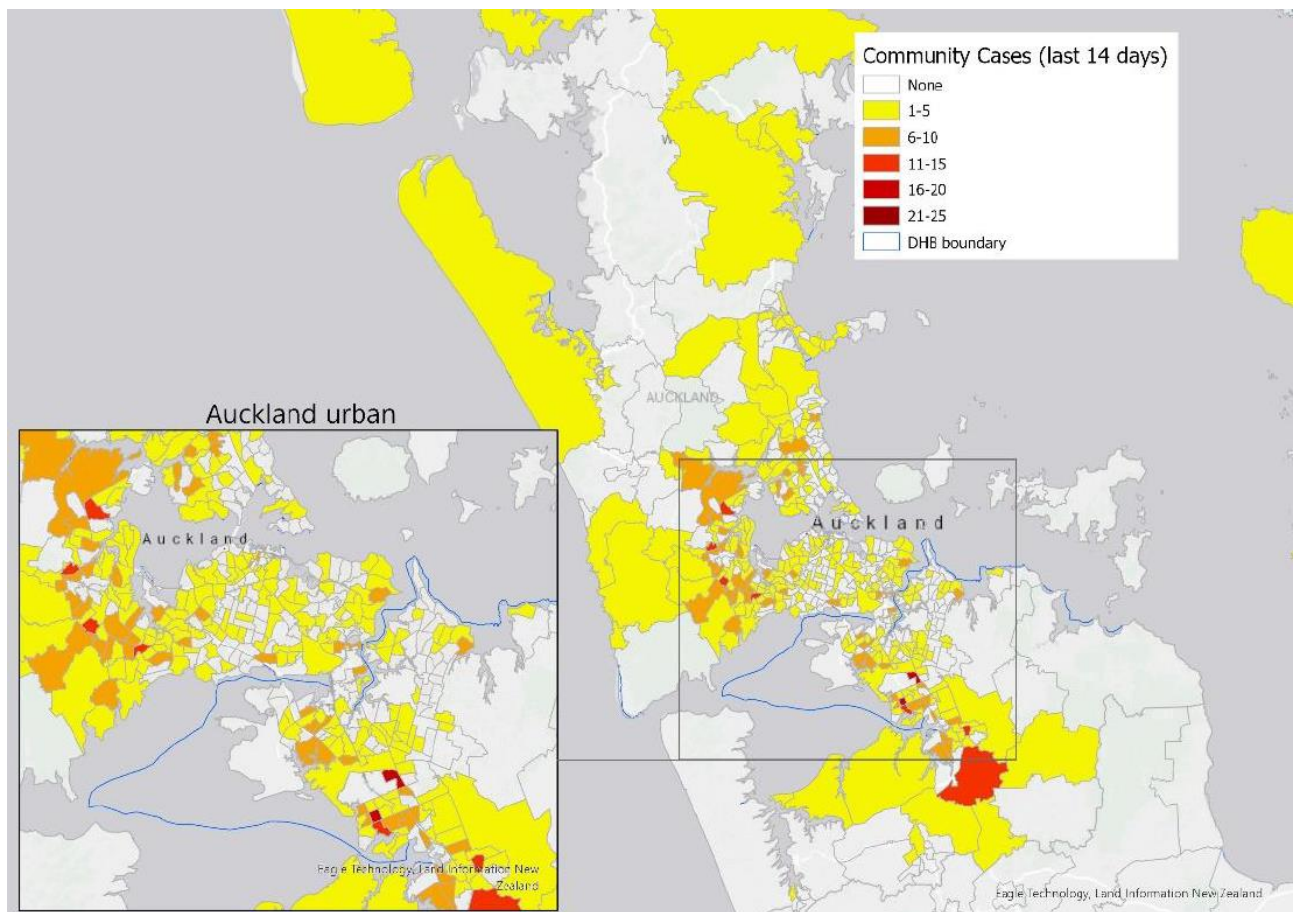
- d. vaccination rates in suburbs/communities of concern.

## Auckland outbreak overview

### *Cases continue to grow in Auckland, but not exponentially*

5. As at 9:30am on Thursday 28 October, there have been 2,793 cases in Auckland during this outbreak. Of these, 1,284 cases remain active and includes 83 new cases reported in the last 24-hours.
6. The overall number of new daily cases reported in the Auckland region has increased throughout October, though not exponentially. The seven-day rolling average for Auckland as of 26 October is 89 cases. This is an increase from a seven-day rolling average of 38 cases reported for the previous risk assessment, undertaken on 13 October. Case numbers continue to track as expected and continue to grow, within an effective R value of between 1.2 and 1.3.
7. There has continued to be a shift from complex households to the risk posed by growth amongst various forms of residential housing, healthcare facilities and some educational centres. Private gatherings (permitted under Alert Level 3) continue to be a major driver of transmission in Auckland.
8. Several cases have been identified in high-risk settings including residential housing and health care settings. It has been noted that there are ongoing issues of cases being uncontactable, which are being rectified with the use of finders services.

Figure 1 - Geographic distribution of confirmed cases in Auckland in the 14 days to 9:00am on 27 October 2021



### Contact tracing and compliance

9. While cases continue to be reported who are not already known contacts there is good testing of contacts. The system is stable and is coping with volume and has capacity. There is also good engagement with contacts, which has been strengthened in recent weeks due to changes made through Pae Ora.
10. As at 9:00am on Thursday 28 October, there are 2,036 open contacts and 36,352 contacts with a quarantine address in Auckland in relation to the August community cases recorded in the National Contact Tracing Solution. 2,027 (99 percent) of open contacts and 34,241 (94 percent) of contacts have received an outbound call from contact tracers to confirm testing and isolation requirements.

*Table 1 - Open contacts that have been reached by the relevant PHU or the NITC*

Contact Type	Total	Reached	Any Result	Positive	Negative
Household	760	759 (99%)	602 (79%)	20 (2.6%)	582 (76%)
Close Plus	121	121 (100%)	109 (90%)	5 (4.1%)	104 (85%)
Close	1,155	1,147 (99%)	1,019 (88%)	3 (0.3%)	1,016 (87%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,036</b>	<b>2,027 (99%)</b>	<b>1,730 (84%)</b>	<b>28 (1.4%)</b>	<b>1,702 (83%)</b>

### Auckland community testing rates remain strong

11. Testing rates remain high in Auckland with a seven-day rolling average of around 14,000. On Wednesday 27 October, 15,468 tests were processed across Auckland (excluding managed isolation facility guests and workers). In the past seven days almost 100,000 tests have been processed.

*Table 2 - Daily community tests completed by Auckland Metro DHBs as at 6.15am on 28 October 2021*

DHB	Measure	Saturday 23/10	Sunday 24/10	Monday 25/10	Tuesday 26/10	Wednesday 27/10
Auckland	<i>Per 1000</i>	8.5	8.5	5.5	5.5	8.4
	<i>Total</i>	4,175	4,192	2,714	2,685	4,157
Counties Manukau	<i>Per 1000</i>	12.4	9.9	5.9	6.8	9.8
	<i>Total</i>	7,358	5,884	3,499	4,057	5,785
Waitemata	<i>Per 1000</i>	12.5	8.6	4.7	5.6	8.8
	<i>Total</i>	7,879	5,406	2,931	3,509	5,526
<b>Total Auckland Metro tests</b>		<b>19,412</b>	<b>15,482</b>	<b>9,144</b>	<b>10,251</b>	<b>15,468</b>

12. There has been increased levels of essential worker testing, with 43,099 tested in the past seven days.

### Wastewater detections continue across many parts of Auckland

13. Wastewater sample testing is ongoing and COVID-19 detections continue across many parts of Auckland – these detections are expected due to the number of cases across Auckland.

*Vaccination rates in across Auckland are above the national average*

14. Vaccination rates have increased since the PHRA on Thursday 14 October. As of Wednesday 27 October, 90 percent of the eligible population in Auckland have had one dose (up 3 percent), and 78 percent have had their second dose (up 13 percent). It is estimated that Auckland metro DHBs will hit 90 percent double dose by late November or early-December.
15. Despite that, inequities in vaccination coverage remain by age group and ethnicity. This includes Māori and Pacific peoples still having relatively low vaccination rates for the 12-19 and 20-34 age groups, and for those who have received a second dose.

*Table 3 - Vaccine uptake by key ethnicities within Auckland Metro DHBs as at 11:59pm on 27 October 2021*

Ethnicity	DHB	First			Second		
		Doses	Doses %	To 90%	Doses	Doses %	To 90%
All	Waitemata	477,145	<b>91%</b>	0	410,477	<b>78%</b>	63,001
	Auckland	395,771	<b>93%</b>	0	346,533	<b>82%</b>	35,029
	Counties Manukau	425,799	<b>88%</b>	8,697	360,828	<b>75%</b>	73,668
	New Zealand	3,657,970	<b>87%</b>	130,181	3,018,830	<b>72%</b>	769,321
Māori	Waitemata	32,218	<b>78%</b>	4,784	24,031	<b>58%</b>	12,971
	Auckland	22,520	<b>81%</b>	2,493	17,261	<b>62%</b>	7,752
	Counties Manukau	45,584	<b>72%</b>	11,560	32,219	<b>51%</b>	24,925
	New Zealand	400,403	<b>70%</b>	113,544	285,593	<b>50%</b>	228,354
Pacific Peoples	Waitemata	31,649	<b>84%</b>	2,167	24,718	<b>66%</b>	9,098
	Auckland	39,081	<b>83%</b>	3,098	30,986	<b>66%</b>	11,193
	Counties Manukau	95,673	<b>82%</b>	9,175	75,416	<b>65%</b>	29,432
	New Zealand	<b>240,109</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>17,904</b>	<b>188,522</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>69,491</b>

*Health system capacity in Auckland is currently adequate*

16. As at 9:00am on Thursday 28 October, there are currently 37 current hospitalisations. Of these, 31 are active cases and six are recovered cases. 12 are in Middlemore Hospital (two are in ICU/HDU), 15 are in Auckland City Hospital (two in ICU/HDU), seven are in North Shore Hospital (one is in ICU/HDU), one is in Waitakere Hospital, two are in Starship Hospital.
17. Health system and hospital capacity in Auckland is adequate. Hospitalisations are tracking according to forecasts, with peak numbers still expected in mid-to-late November.
18. NHRCC are encouraged by the lower ICU conversion rate for hospitalised cases and if this rate continues the risks related to ICU capacity will be minimised. This low conversion rate is likely in part to the younger age profile of cases in this outbreak, with the average age of cases and those hospitalities both at around 30-years-old.
19. An increasing number of cases are being managed at home (approximately 310 cases) rather than an MIQ. As a result, capacity in MIQ is adequate. In addition, there is

capacity to manage about 700 households in the community MIQ model using Primary Care providers and this should be manageable at the levels NHRCC are forecasting.

## Christchurch

20. The Ministry of Health was notified late on Wednesday 27 October of two COVID-19 cases in Christchurch from the same household. Both are unvaccinated.
21. The available information to date indicates that there are at least 12 close contacts. Work is underway to locate five of these contacts. At least two of these contacts have been referred to finders services. Three contacts have returned negatives test.
22. Furthermore, interviews so far suggest that the cases have not been involved in any super-spreader events. Instead, they appear to have stayed in mainly lower risk settings such as supermarkets, shops, buses, and takeaway shops, and some household visits. GPS data is in the process of being obtained to confirm the truck driver's movements.

s 9(2)(a), s 9(2)(c)

25. Neither cases were prolific users of the COVID Tracer App and further information on their movements is still being sought.

### Testing in Christchurch

26. Compared to Auckland Metro DHBs, testing rates across Canterbury have been low.

Table 4 - Daily community tests completed by Canterbury DHBs as at 6.15am on 28 October 2021

DHB	Measure	Saturday 23/10	Sunday 24/10	Monday 25/10	Tuesday 26/10	Wednesday 27/10
Canterbury	Per 1000	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0
	Total	545	634	291	865	1,200

27. Christchurch Community and Public Health have advised that there is good capacity for surge testing if required and that there is MIQ capacity for approximately 40 cases.
28. The virus was not detected in the latest Christchurch wastewater sample, which was taken on Tuesday 26 October. A sample collected from Christchurch on Wednesday 27 October was received this morning (Thursday 28 October), with a result expected by Friday 29 October.
29. Of note, there have been recent cases identified in the Christchurch MIQ so a detection in the wastewater may be a result of infection in returnees rather than in the

community. The catchment also serves a population of approximately 300,000 so wastewater testing may not detect a small number of cases.

30. ESR have not received samples from Rolleston this week but it will work to obtain sample collections over the next seven days. This will also include samples to be collected from Waimakariri (covers Rangiora/Kiapoi/Woodend) and Ashburton.

#### *Vaccinations in Canterbury*

31. Rates of vaccination in Canterbury sit close to the national average, with 89 percent of people having received their first dose and 69 percent receiving their second. Vaccination rates still lag for Māori, which currently sit at 74 percent and 51 percent respectively for first and second doses.
32. Around the suburbs where the two cases reside, rates of vaccination sit close to around the average for Canterbury, with most of the surrounding local areas achieving first dose rates of more than 90 percent.

#### **The rest of New Zealand (excluding parts of Waikato at Alert Level 3 Step 1)**

s 9(2)(a)

34. Other than those cases, no further cases have been detected in the rest of New Zealand (excluding Waikato and Northland) since an essential worker in Palmerston North on Sunday 3 October. However, as shown by these cases there remains a heightened risk of cases being seeded to other parts of New Zealand from Auckland and Waikato.

#### *Testing*

35. Community testing rates continue to be the lowest in areas outside of Auckland, Northland, and Waikato, particularly within the South Island DHB areas.
36. There have been no unexpected wastewater detections outside of the Waikato, Auckland, and Palmerston North areas.

#### *Vaccination*

37. Vaccination uptake in the rest of New Zealand continue to increase but at a lower rate than previous weeks.

### **Public health advice and recommendations**

38. Based on today's PHRA and the information to date, the public health risk in:
  - a. Auckland remains **HIGH**.
  - b. The rest of New Zealand remains (excluding parts of Waikato at Alert Level 3 Step 1) remains **LOW**.

### **Public health recommendations**

39. Based on the PHRA, and the information available, our recommendations are that:

- a. Auckland remain at Alert Level 3 Step 1 until at least 11.59pm on Monday 15 November.
  - b. Christchurch remain at Alert Level 2 for the time being as further case investigation and testing occurs and is actively monitored. Obtaining the results for identified close contacts is critical for determining if a higher Alert Level is required.
  - c. The rest of New Zealand (excluding parts of Waikato currently at Alert Level 3 Step 1) remain at Alert Level 2 until at least 11.59pm on Monday 15 November.
  - d. These settings be reviewed again in two weeks on Thursday 11 November.
40. At the same time, the following needs to continue:
- a. Increasing vaccination rates, with a particular focus on rural and vulnerable communities.
  - b. Encouraging the public to continue to be tested if they are a contact of a case and/or have any COVID-19 symptoms.
  - c. Increasing communications to reinforce and improve compliance to Alert Level 2 restrictions.
41. It is also recommended that consideration is given to easing restrictions on outdoor gatherings and events to allow no limits on gathering size.
42. From a public health perspective, the above recommendations are proportionate and consistent with the public health risk.

### **Rationale for these public health risk assessment recommendations**

#### *Auckland*

43. Given that the available evidence indicates that the risk is not decreasing and is most likely slowly increasing, there is not yet a basis to ease restrictions in Auckland.
44. Cases numbers in Auckland are tracking as expected, within an effective R value of between 1.2 and 1.3 with an upwards trajectory. We have also yet to see the full impact of the recent reopening of schools for Year 11 to 13 students on 26 October and whether it will result in increased transmission. Easing restrictions further at this time could add too many extra variables into current outbreak. In the meantime, there continues to be a focus on getting vaccination rates up across Auckland.
45. Consideration was given to increasing the limit on outdoor gatherings in Auckland to 25 people, noting the very few cases linked to Step 1 settings for outdoor gatherings of 10 people. However, while it may improve personal wellbeing, on balance the public health risk assessment panel believed it would be too risky to introduce further bespoke changes, rather than shifting to the full suite of Step 2 settings or shifting to the recently announced COVID-19 Protection Framework.
46. Auckland's Alert Level restrictions and vaccination rates are helping to keep case numbers lower than they might be otherwise. This was shown in a recent comparison between the outbreak in Auckland and Victoria, despite Auckland's outbreak initially accelerating faster than Victoria's outbreak.
47. Therefore, the situation does not yet support a move to Step 2 of an Alert Level 3 step down and I recommend maintaining the status quo for at least another two weeks.

### *Christchurch*

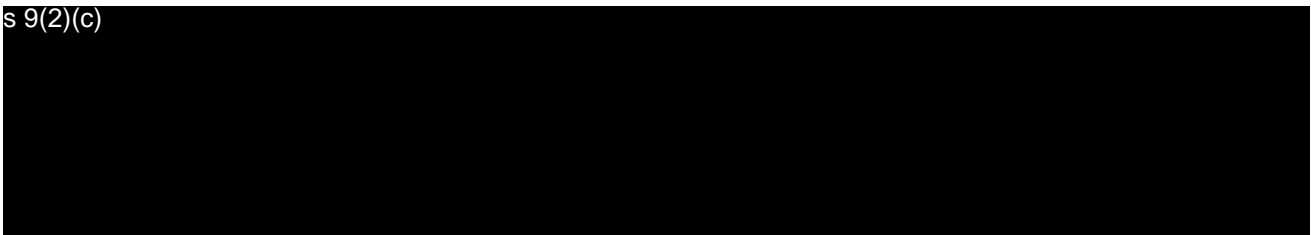
48. A PHRA for Christchurch was conducted following the PHRA for Auckland and the rest of New Zealand. The case investigation is at an early stage, with test results from the identified close contacts still to come. Considering this, the public health assessment panel recommends that the existing Alert Level 2 settings should remain in place until more information is available. However, the situation in Christchurch and the public health settings will need to be actively reviewed pending the results of the close contacts.
49. Initial information indicates that neither cases have been to any high-risk venues such as bars and pubs or significant social gatherings. While the extent of their movements and exposures is still being ascertained, the available information to date indicates that the main concern is visits to several other households during the cases' infectious period. Members of these households are considered as close contacts and are in the process of being tested. These tests are being prioritised with urgency.
50. Both cases are cooperating with contact tracers. Previous circumstances where we recommended an escalation to Alert Level 3 (e.g., Northland) was when the initial case was not being cooperative with contact tracers, which provided very little information to inform decision making. In this situation, the initial information from the two cases has quickly identified the contacts which are at most risk, whom are being tested.
51. Critical to determining whether we would recommend an escalation to Alert Level 3 in Christchurch are the results of the close contacts. In addition, if any close contacts test positive, whether they had any significant exposure events.
52. The panel considers that a move to Alert Level 3 for Christchurch is not proportionate at this stage (pending any further information regarding the close contacts).

### *The rest of New Zealand (excluding parts of Waikato at Alert Level 3 Step 1)*

53. There is a continued risk that COVID-19 may be seeded outside of the Alert Level 3 boundary, particularly with increasing case numbers in the Auckland region, as today's cases in Christchurch demonstrate and the recent case discovered in Blenheim. As such, it is recommended that Alert Level 2 restrictions are continued and be reinforced while the risk in Auckland and other Level 3 areas remains high.
54. The public health risk assessment panel noted that consideration should be given to the settings for outdoor gatherings and events to allow no limits on gathering size. This recognises that outdoor gatherings and events are very low risk and would not appreciably increase the risk of transmission. This advice is also consistent with the initial public health advice for Alert Level 2 settings.

## **Equity**

s 9(2)(c)





56. While the current outbreak appears to be broadening in terms of demographic impact across Auckland, it is expected that Māori and Pacific peoples will continue to experience disproportionately negative health impacts because of high levels of existing co-mobilities amongst these populations and lower levels of vaccination coverage.

s 9(2)(c)

59. The current public health measures across Auckland and the rest of New Zealand can support equity of health outcomes and provide the chance for people to get vaccinated before the risk of exposure to COVID-19 increases. Given that the same communities who are disproportionately affected by a widespread outbreak are also disproportionately affected by the social and economic impacts of public health controls, increasing vaccination rates for these groups, with the limited time afforded by the public health controls, is essential for minimising harm to overall health and social outcomes.
60. Insights from the sector have indicated that Māori providers are particularly stretched across this outbreak. Non-Māori primary care, providers, and DHBs will need to support Māori providers with any additional outreach programmes.
61. Ensuring an increased uptake will also require easily accessible information on the vaccine. Recent research into vaccine hesitancy amongst Māori has indicated that whānau need clear and balanced information when considering the vaccine.

## New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 (NZBORA)

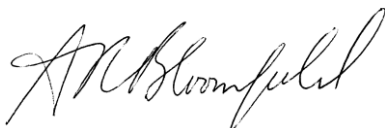
62. Alert Level 3 involves restrictions to freedom of movement and peaceful assembly, and possibly freedom of association of persons in the affected areas. These limits are justified under section 5 of the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 because there is community transmission of COVID-19 in an area with low vaccination rates and the public health consequences of the outbreak spreading substantially outweigh the impact of the temporary restriction of these freedoms.

## Recommendations

We recommend that you:

- a) **Note** that a public health risk assessment for Auckland and the rest of New Zealand (excluding parts of Waikato currently at Alert Level 3 Step 1) was completed on Thursday, 28 October 2021. **Noted**

- b) **Note** that the public health risk assessment concluded that the risk of undetected community transmission within:
- i. Auckland remains HIGH. **Noted**
  - ii. The rest of New Zealand (excluding parts of Waikato at Alert Level 3 Step 1) remains LOW. **Noted**
- c) **Note** that the conclusions of today's public health assessment do not yet support a shift to Alert Level 3 Step 2 for Auckland. **Noted**
- d) **Agree** that Auckland stay Alert Level 3 Step 1, until at least 11:59pm on Monday 15 November. **Yes/No**
- e) **Agree** that the rest of New Zealand (excluding parts of Waikato at Alert Level 3 Step 1), remain at Alert Level 2 until at least 11:59pm on Monday 15 November. **Yes/No**
- f) **Agree** that Christchurch remain at Alert Level 2 for now while the situation is actively monitored and pending the test results of close contacts and further case investigation. **Yes/No**
- g) **Agree** that the Alert Level settings for Auckland and the rest of New Zealand (excluding parts of Waikato currently at Alert Level 3 Step 1) will be reviewed again on Thursday 11 November. **Yes/No**
- h) **Agree** that consideration is given to easing restrictions on outdoor gatherings and events to allow no limits on gathering size noting that outdoor gatherings and events are very low risk and would not appreciably increase the risk of transmission. **Yes/No**
- i)) **Agree** to forward this advice to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. **Yes/No**



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

Date: 28 October 2021