

Health Report

COVID-19: Advice on Mass Gatherings

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To:	Ministers with Power to Act – COVID-19		
Copy to:	Hon Jenny Salesa, Minister of Customs		
Ministers with Power to Act	A group of Ministers with Power to Act on New Zealand's response to the novel coronavirus outbreak comprising the Prime Minister, and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Tourism, Finance, Education, Health, Immigration, Trade and Export Growth.		

Contact for telephone discussion

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Action for Private Secretaries

COVID-19 – Advice on Mass Gatherings

Purpose of report

This report provides you with initial advice on mass gatherings.

Current state

1. Information about mass gatherings is available on the Ministry of Health website for event organisers and event attendees. Officials understand Healthline is receiving calls from members of the public, event organisers and local authorities seeking information and advice. Healthline is directing callers to the Ministry of Health website.
2. At present the Ministry of Health has been providing advice to event organisers on:
 - a. how to proceed with large public events
 - b. how to brief event staff
 - c. health precautions for staff and attendees
 - d. advice on face masks.
3. The Ministry of Health also has advice for event attendees about:
 - a. attending public events (i.e., anyone who is unwell should not attend events, and that those from Category 1A and 1B countries are being asked to self-isolate for 14 days)
 - b. how to minimise the risk of getting sick at an event (good hygiene practices).
4. The Ministry of Health does not at present recommend altering arrangements (i.e., to restrict, modify, postpone or cancel events) for all public events, but have provided four considerations for event organisers to enable them to assess the risks. These considerations are:
 - a. the latest local, national and international advice on COVID-19
 - b. whether people attending the event may have been exposed to, or infected with, COVID-19 and what risk this might pose to others
 - c. the characteristics of the event (for example, the number of people expected; accommodation arrangements; indoor or outdoor, duration, the countries that participants, performers and attendees are travelling from; etc.) and whether they might increase the risk and/or spread of COVID-19
 - d. what measures could be put in place to help reduce the spread of any disease.

Mass gatherings and social distancing measures

5. Public/mass gatherings increase the number of close contacts between people for long periods, sometimes in contained spaces. Disease can be transmitted during a mass gathering, during transit to and from the event, and in participants' home communities upon their return.
6. When transmission becomes sustained in the community, and the peak of the epidemic is still some weeks away, cancellation of public gathering should be actively considered.

Data from seasonal and pandemic influenza models indicate that during the mitigation phase, cancellations of public gatherings before the peak of epidemics or pandemics may reduce virus transmission.

7. When transmission is sustained other social distancing measures may include:
 - a. closure of school/universities
 - b. stopping public gatherings (such as public gatherings, such as sport events, concerts, religious events, large social events (charity functions, University Balls) and conferences)
 - c. closing places of work where infection has been identified
 - d. mobility restrictions into and out of towns and cities.
8. Stopping mass gatherings can be effective to control transmission and spread in situations where there is rampant asymptomatic spread. Such control measures can control spread, minimise morbidity and mortality, delay and reduce the epidemic peak, preserve health resources. The global evidence is still developing about asymptomatic transmission of COVID-19.
9. The WHO interim guidance on key planning recommendations for mass gatherings in the context of the current COVID-19 notes that specific features of the event that should be considered. These include features such as crowd density, the nature of contact between participants and the age of participants (because elderly people who have co-morbid conditions appear to be more seriously affected).

Assessing the risk of mass gatherings in New Zealand

10. Officials consider that any escalation around the restriction of mass gatherings should be guided by:
 - a. learnings from other countries (e.g. Italy¹)
 - b. clinical advice (based on transmissibility and severity of disease)
 - c. risk of community level transmission.
11. If New Zealand has cases of person to person transmission, social distancing measures including restriction or prohibition of mass gatherings should be considered.
12. Officials consider that:
 - a. the cancellation or postponement of an event should be considered if a significant risk is identified based on the context of the gathering (size, duration etc) and local epidemiology
 - b. decisions to cancel or postpone an even should be taken on a case-by-case basis and coordinated between the event organiser and public health officials.

¹ Health authorities in Italy are implementing measures to prevent onward transmission, including closing of schools and bars and cancelling of sports events and other mass gatherings in the areas affected by localised spread.

13. New Zealand could take a precautionary approach, short of stopping mass gatherings. This would involve advising that organisational measures to reduce the risk posed by mass gatherings including interpersonal distancing measures to avoid crowding, facilitation of hygiene measures.
14. This could be in the form of advising people not to go to mass gatherings if they are unwell and ensuring events have appropriate hygiene facilities (including handwashing or sanitiser stations at entry points, food areas and toilets). These additional public health measures can help reduce the risk of transmission at mass gatherings.
15. The Ministry of Health will continue to disseminate messaging around events and mass gatherings. This will ensure communities are aware of the risks in advance, and can evaluate the risk of transmission against other factors (including cultural practices and protocols). It might be appropriate to encourage social distancing for people attending such events, rather than discouraging people from attending.

Spectrum for response

16. There is also a spectrum for how the Government might want to respond to mass gatherings at a national level. This spectrum and the key considerations are outlined below.
17. Officials would also advise that the risk is likely to differ based on location.

	Response			
	<i>Voluntary</i>	<i>Advise</i>	<i>Direct</i>	<i>Prohibit</i>
Event organisers	Event organisers make their own decisions based on their own risk assessment.	Event organisers are advised to consider restricting, modifying or cancelling their event based on potential risk.	Event organisers are directed to restrict, modify or cancel their event based on public health risk.	Powers are authorised to prohibit mass gatherings. Organisers are prohibited from arranging mass gatherings.
Event attendees	Event attendees make their own decisions.	Event attendees are advised not to attend if they meet particular criteria (i.e. are unwell or have been in places or countries with community transmission).	Event attendees are directed not to attend events because of the public health risk.	Individuals are prohibited from attending mass gatherings as powers are authorised to prohibit these.

18. Emergency powers are available under section 70 of the Health Act 1956 to prohibit mass gatherings, should public health needs require it. Once the power is authorised, either by the Minister of Health or because an emergency has been declared under the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002, the medical officer of health will decide how to implement that power.

19. As COVID-19 is a quarantinable disease, the Prime Minister can issue an epidemic notice that grants medical officers of health very wide powers to (for example) prohibit public gatherings.

Upcoming events

20. There are several events due to take place Auckland:
- Pasifika festival (14 and 15 March 2020)
 - PolyFest (18 to 21 March 2020)
 - Super Rugby game (Blues playing Lions) on 14 March 2020.
21. Given attendees are travelling to and from the Pacific Islands to attend PolyFest and Pasifika events, there is an increased risk of COVID-19 entering the Pacific via transmission from New Zealand. Urgent work by New Zealand border sector agencies is under way to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 entering the Pacific via transmission from New Zealand.
22. Pacific countries are vulnerable to severe impacts from a COVID-19 outbreak. While New Zealand has been working closely with Pacific partners, the World Health Organisation and Australia on regional preparedness, readiness across the region remains highly variable, and no location is well placed to respond to a first case or outbreak of COVID-19.
23. Pacific countries are expected to be more severely impacted by COVID-19 outbreaks than developed countries such as New Zealand, due to factors such as weaker health systems, high levels of non-communicable diseases and associated health complications as well as living conditions.
24. Officials have been in discussion with the New Zealand Rugby Football Union (NZRFU) about risks for mass gatherings at Super Rugby matches.
25. Officials want to ensure that any risks associated with these events are assessed, so that event organisers can make an informed decision. As Auckland has cases of COVID-19, officials are able to undertake a risk assessment in conjunction with the event organisers so that they can come to an informed position on whether to restrict, modify or cancel their event.

Recommendations

The Ministry recommends that you:

- Note** the advice on the Pacific considerations in this paper including the implications for Pacific related events (Pasifika and PolyFest). **Yes/No**
- Direct** Officials to work with event organisers to undertake a risk assessment in order to reach a decision on whether the events should go ahead. **Yes/No**
- Note** Officials advice on restricting or cancelling mass gatherings should be considered within the context of other social distancing measures as part of the wider public health response to COVID-19. **Yes/No**