



Official Media Release

As at Tuesday 27th April 2021, 3PM

Cook Islands COVID-19 Alert Level System Strengthened

Following his official visit to New Zealand 25 March – 3 April 2021, Prime Minister Mark Brown has announced an overhaul to the Cook Islands COVID-19 Alert Level system. The changes, led by Te Marae Ora – Ministry of Health, preserve aspects of the colour coded system the Cook Islands instituted at the onset of the pandemic, with the addition of a numerical codification bringing the system into alignment with the alert level classifications already in use in New Zealand.

Said Prime Minister Brown, “COVID-19 continues to present a significant threat to the public health of the Cook Islands, and is anticipated to remain a threat for a prolonged period through to at least Quarter 4 of 2021. We’re grateful for the collaboration that has taken place so far in scoping and progressing the Quarantine-free Travel Arrangement (QFT-A) with New Zealand, however there remain some aspects of readiness that need further bolstering.”

“Per my meeting with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in March and further confirmed in all public communications since, I instructed my officials to finalise all remaining work required for the QFT-A by 1 May 2021. I am receiving regular updates from my officials on the final pieces of our readiness, via the Border Easement Taskforce (BET), and I have further instructed the BET to provide a final assessment of readiness to Cabinet across health, border and industry settings by Thursday 29 April. We have been uncompromising in our commitment to ensuring all necessary health and border measures are instituted to the highest standards of protection against COVID-19 prior to commencement of the QFT-A, and I expect this to continue going forward.”

“While my instructions to officials have been to ensure the completion of readiness tasking by 1 May, I must also acknowledge the central impetus for the Cook Islands in re-establishing safe travel between our two nations goes beyond balance book considerations. Continued closure of the border elevates our pressure points to those relating to structural degradation of the Cook Islands private and public sectors and sustained long-term negative impacts, including threats to the very composition of Cook Islands society, business and culture. These pressures have been well understood by my Cabinet and line Agencies and in addition to QFT-A related work, concerted effort has been made towards identifying support mechanisms we can put in place to alleviate the economic losses brought about by the border restrictions,

such as the extension to the wage subsidy to 30 June 2021, as an interim support measure prior to the QFT-A coming into effect.”

Continued Prime Minister Brown, “While we continue to do all we can to provide further support to business and as communicated to Prime Minister Ardern during the visit and since, I cannot and will not sacrifice safety for the sake of expediency. My officials have therefore been instructed to work at pace to ensure we can uphold both. I expect the advice of the BET to remain impartial, objective and clear-eyed about our level of readiness to safely operationalise the QFT-A. This is of upmost importance to preserve the health and safety of our people, as has been the priority of this Government since the onset of COVID-19.”

“Since my official visit to New Zealand in March, the BET have recommended to Cabinet a set of urgent readiness tasks that has been progressed in recent weeks,” Prime Minister Brown said.

“One of these was a necessary examination and strengthening of the Cook Islands COVID19 Alert Level system to achieve a number of objectives. First, continued public confidence in and greater cohesion across our All-of-Government, All-of-Society response to COVID-19. Second, alignment with the New Zealand COVID-19 alert levels system, recognizing the fluidity of movement between our countries by residents and visitors alike including under the QFT-A. And third, greater clarity to the impact New Zealand’s settings and emergence of clusters has on the Cook Islands risk profile.”

“Our enhanced COVID-19 Alert Level system which I’m delighted to announce today provides greater clarity on the community, government and industry actions required at each level of Alert, streamlined alignment with New Zealand and ultimately, heightened protection of our people against the risks posed by COVID-19.”

Today’s announcement builds on preparedness work that has been underway since July 2020, led by the Cook Islands Border Easement Taskforce (BET).

To date, the Cook Islands have never had a confirmed case of COVID-19. Since January 2020, our national approach to COVID-19 has been one of preparedness, with key efforts across government and whole of society centered on fortifying our borders as well as educating the general public on safe public health practices such as pragmatic physical distancing and regular washing of hands to ensure we’re already utilising the practical public health tools that will ultimately protect and keep safe our resident population (should the COVID19 virus arrive in the Cook Islands).

Careful and detailed preventative and mitigative measures across both health and border settings in the Cook Islands and New Zealand have been built into the design of a Quarantine-free Travel Arrangement (QFT-A) and supporting Annexes, as agreed and signed by Prime Ministers Brown and Ardern on 21 December 2020 (NZ) and 6 January 2021 (CKI), respectively.

Continued Prime Minister Brown, “The Cook Islands refreshed Alert Level system further bolsters our protection against COVID19, and I look forward to providing

further updates on the final remaining readiness work via the BET in the coming days.”

“For now, I encourage all Cook Islanders to familiarise themselves with the revisions to our Alert Level system, with further detailed information on each Alert Level and resultant interventions to be pushed out by the BET and Te Marae Ora Ministry of Health in the coming days.”

Officials of both governments have been working at pace since the Prime Ministers official visit in March, with a technical team from Te Marae Ora supported by the BET stationed in New Zealand for 2 weeks to finalise urgent procedures and policy drafting in early April, in addition to a team from the New Zealand Ministry of Health currently in Rarotonga undertaking a 2-week attachment at Te Marae Ora to further support and assist in the completion of necessary readiness documentation, plans and procedures. The BET are expected to report back to Cabinet at the end of this week with a Consolidated Readiness Assessment for commencement of the QFT-A.

For further information visit www.covid19.gov.ck