



13 September 2021

Media statement from the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands, the Hon Mark Brown

Alert Level 2 extended to keep Cook Islands safe

The Cook Islands will remain at Alert Level 2 until there has been 14 days in New Zealand without any new cases of community transmission of COVID-19. Additionally, the travel advisory restricting inward arrivals to the Cook Islands has been further extended until 11.59pm on 28 September 2021.

Prime Minister Mark Brown said that while today's decision by Cabinet would be disappointing for many people, there was good news with additional financial support announced today, an update on people stranded in New Zealand, and an indication of when tourism might resume.

He said Cabinet made the alert decision based on the latest information and advice from health advisors and professionals in Te Marae Ora Ministry of Health (TMO) and in New Zealand, where Alert Level 4 was yesterday extended in Auckland until 11.59pm on Tuesday 21 September and Alert Level 2 for the rest of the country.

“As one of the few countries in the world that has managed to keep COVID-19 out, we do not want to do anything to jeopardise the safety of our people,” said Prime Minister Brown. “While we acknowledge that at some point in the future all countries will need to learn to live with COVID-19, that time has not yet come. We do not want an outbreak here. The impact on our health resources as well as our economy would be devastating.”

Prime Minister Brown said the Government was doing everything possible to protect the health and wellbeing of Cook Islanders, as well as the economy. He said that is why Cabinet has made the following decisions:

- Alert Level 2 extended until New Zealand has no community transmission for 14 days.
- Inward arrivals to the Cook Islands restricted until 11.59pm on Tuesday 28 September 2021.
- Wage subsidies to continue for September 2021.
- Business grants including sole trader grants reinstated for October 2021.
- Managed return of the stranded Cook Island Residents in New Zealand regions at Alert Level 2.
- Mandatory tag-in of CookSafe tag or manual registration by 1 October 2021.
- Visitors from New Zealand likely once New Zealand is at Alert Level 1, with a mandatory vaccination requirement for people aged over 12 years.

Alert level 2 extension

One-way travel between New Zealand and the Cook Islands to remain suspended until the Government is confident there has been no new community transmission of COVID-19 in New Zealand for 14 days. All conditions regarding this alert level remain in place.

Financial support announced today

The reinstatement of one round of business grants to be paid in October was announced today. There will also be grants for sole traders. The size of these grants will be slightly larger than previously, with the same criteria of business size by turnover and employee number.

Wage subsidies for eligible businesses will be paid for the full month of September. Information on eligibility can be found on the MFEM website (mfem.gov.ck/err), and on MFEM social media accounts.

Return of stranded Cook Islands residents from NZ

Cook Islands residents stranded in regions of New Zealand that are at Alert Level 2 or below may soon be repatriated on a flight from Christchurch. Those people will need to complete a 'Cook Islands Managed Return Application Form', attaching all supplementary information as required and indicated on the form.

No dates have yet been set for the flight, but this will be communicated directly to those travellers approved to return to the Cook Islands under a managed return flight.

Stranded residents will need to undergo at least seven days in MIQ on arrival to the Cook Islands, in addition to provision of a negative COVID-19 test result within 72 hours prior to departure and mandatory completion of the 'Online Contact Information Form'. Further details on this process will be provided directly to applicants.

Due to the public health risk and on the advice of TMO, registered Cook Islands residents sheltering in Auckland must wait for the alert level to drop to Level 2 or below before repatriation can begin. Any Cook Islands residents sheltering in Auckland who require additional assistance are urged to contact the Cook Islands High Commission in New Zealand. Further information will be provided around enhanced support to these stranded residents.

Opening up to NZ visitors

Cabinet today indicated that re-opening the border with New Zealand for quarantine-free travel would not happen until it was fully confident there was no community transmission of COVID-19 in New Zealand. This would likely occur when New Zealand was at Alert Level 1. All future tourists to the Cook Islands aged above 12 years would need to be fully vaccinated (except those with a medical certificate).

Prime Minister Brown said that while the impact of no visitors was very significant for the Cook Islands economy, he hoped for the most optimistic scenario of a short border closure with New Zealand. He said \$15 million had been earmarked for additional business support in the June budget.

"We know that our tourism market is resilient and so too is our economy. We saw how fast tourism bounced back in May and it will happen again," he said.

Reminders

Prime Minister Brown reminded all Cook Islands residents that travel to New Zealand at this time is not recommended, and that travellers should be aware they will not be eligible for managed return due to entering New Zealand while border closures are in place.

He also reminded all Cook Islanders to remember to tag or sign in with CookSafe and to turn on Bluetooth for CookSafe+. He said Cabinet has indicated this will be mandatory from 1 October 2021. Prime Minister Brown asked everyone to keep up with frequent hand washing, mask-wearing and physical distancing. Most importantly, he urged those who haven't already done so, to please get vaccinated with urgency.

People are also advised to regularly check official communications for both the Cook Islands and New Zealand at their websites, which are: www.covid19.gov.ck and www.covid19.govt.nz

[Ends]

For media enquiries, contact Karla Eggelton: QFT-A Comms Coordinator
karla.eggelton@cookislands.gov.ck