



28 September 2021

## **MEDIA STATEMENT FROM THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE COOK ISLANDS, HON. MARK BROWN - 28 SEPTEMBER 2021**

### **Border restrictions to the Cook Islands extended**

The Cook Islands will further extend its travel advisory restricting inward arrivals to the Cook Islands until 11.59pm on Thursday 4 November 2021.

Prime Minister Brown said that today's Cabinet decision to extend the current travel advisory from 27 September until 4 November was based on the advice of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration (MFAI) and Te Marae Ora Ministry of Health (TMO). Both Ministries advised that with the return of the stranded Cook Islanders from New Zealand scheduled for next month, the highest possible precautions should continue to be taken.

Prime Minister Brown said that extending the travel advisory until 4 November would mean that those returning to the Cook Islands on the second repatriation flight would have cleared Managed Isolation Quarantine 7 days prior, on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> October. This will allow invaluable time for the Border Easement Taskforce and Cabinet to reassess whether settings have been met for the safe resumption of regular inwards travel, and to pivot staffing and other officials towards this resumption if determined safe to do so at that point.

### **Managed returns update**

Christchurch repatriation flight on Thursday 7 October - Approximately 90 people currently sheltering in Alert Level 2 regions of New Zealand have qualified for managed return to Rarotonga, classified as 'Cohort # 1' for the purposes of managed return. They will arrive in the Cook Islands on Wednesday 6 October, where they will enter into at least seven days of Managed Isolation Quarantine (MIQ) at the Edgewater Resort. During this period they will need to clear day 0 and day 5 tests for COVID-19 before being discharged and cleared for exit of MIQ by Te Marae Ora Ministry of Health.

Auckland repatriation flight on Friday 15 October - Approximately 280 people currently sheltering in the Auckland region at Alert Level 3 have qualified for managed return to Rarotonga, classified as 'Cohort # 2' for the purposes of managed return. They will arrive in the Cook Islands on Thursday 14 October, where they will enter into at least 14 days of MIQ at the Edgewater Resort and will have additional COVID-19 testing before being discharged and cleared for exit of MIQ by Te Marae Ora Ministry of Health.

Pre-departure - Both groups will undergo a COVID-19 test 72 hours before departure, as well as a health screening test at the airport before boarding. Enhanced pre-departure testing and isolation requirements have been put in place for Cohort # 2, noting the increased risk profile of those sheltering in the Auckland region at Alert Level 3. People who qualified for repatriation had to meet strict criteria and receive approval from MFAI.

## **Precautionary approach**

Prime Minister Brown stressed that with Auckland still at Alert Level 3 and Delta infections still occurring in the community, the Government was continuing to take a measured approach to repatriation and inward travel restrictions.

“It is critical we ensure all the right steps continue to be taken to minimise any risk and maintain our very fortunate COVID-free status,” he said. “We will not risk the health and safety of our people, particularly our children who are more vulnerable as they are not yet vaccinated.”

## **Vaccination update**

Prime Minister Brown said it was very pleasing that more than 96% of eligible Cook Islanders are fully vaccinated, with vaccinations for children aged 12-15 years starting before the end of October.

“While vaccinations are our armour to protect us from COVID-19, our continued use of strong border controls and public health measures to minimise the risk of importation of COVID-19 remains of paramount importance. It is inevitable that there will come a time where we will need to manage COVID-19 in the Cook Islands, but we have not reached that day just yet. For now, the priority is returning our stranded residents in a way that minimises the risk of COVID entering the Cook Islands. At the same time the vaccination of 12-15 year olds will soon get underway, and we will continue our efforts to build the resilience of our health and border systems.”

Government has provided clear indication that all future visitors to the Cook Islands aged above 12 years would need to be fully vaccinated (except those with a medical certificate).

## **Reminders**

Prime Minister Brown reminded all Cook Islands residents that travel to New Zealand is not currently 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+.

Prime Minister Brown asked everyone to keep up with frequent hand washing, mask-wearing and physical distancing. 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](http://www.covid19.gov.ck) and [www.covid19.govt.nz](http://www.covid19.govt.nz)

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