



OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER
HON MARK BROWN
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

MEDIA RELEASE
PRIME MINISTER'S UPDATE RE BORDER OPENING
16 December 2021

Last month I announced that our country would re-open our air border from the 13 January 2022 (CKT).

That decision was based on a range of high-level advice from the Government's Border Easement Taskforce and data modelling experts in New Zealand. I said at the time that this reopening would allow for two-way quarantine-free travel from New Zealand and that there would be an eligibility criterion for travellers which would include requiring them to be double-vaccinated and provide a negative COVID-19 test prior to travel.

Today I am able to tell you about the Cook Islands Covid-19 Safe Framework that was approved by our Cabinet this week. These are the rules by which people will be able to enter the Cook Islands once the border is reopened in mid-January. This Framework will be enforceable under new regulations available to Te Marae Ora (TMO).

Under the Safe Framework there will be three different groups of visitors able to enter the country, each group will need to comply with its own particular set of rules.

The three groups are Tourists, Permit Holders and Cook Islanders or PRs.

All three groups must complete the TMO online form 96 hours before departure; return a negative PCR covid test undertaken within 48 hours of departure and they must have been in New Zealand for at least 10 days prior to entry into the Cook Islands.

In addition to the above, Group 1 (Tourists) may only enter the country if they are fully vaccinated. There are no exceptions to this requirement. Consequently, children

under 12 years will not be able to enter the country unless and until they are vaccinated.

Those in Group 2 (Permit holders for work or residence) may enter the country if they're vaccinated. There are two exceptions to the vaccination requirement, firstly for children aged under 12 and secondly for those aged over 12 who cannot be vaccinated because of a medical exemption.

Those permitted entry under an exemption will be subject to certain additional public health controls upon their arrival to the Cook Islands, for example, they will be required to self-isolate at home for 5 days and undertake COVID tests.

Cook Islanders and Cook Islands Permanent Residents comprise Group 3.

Group 3 may enter the country regardless of their vaccination status, however, those who are unvaccinated will be subject to certain additional public health controls upon arrival in the country.

For example, Group 3 travellers aged 12 and over who are not vaccinated and do not have a medical exemption must undergo 10 days in Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ) at their own cost and undertake 3 tests during that time.

If a minor (aged 12 – 17) in this group is travelling unaccompanied, a caregiver/guardian will have to enter quarantine with them, and that cost will also need to be paid for.

Group 3 travellers who have a medical exemption from vaccination must isolate at home for 5 days upon arrival and undertake two tests during that time.

Children aged under 12 travelling with vaccinated adults (or adults exempt from vaccination) or travelling unaccompanied, must isolate at home for 5 days upon arrival, and undertake two tests.

Children aged under 12 and who are travelling with unvaccinated adults, must enter MIQ with their families.

New Zealand will remain our only international gateway for the time being and provide an additional safety buffer, so a traveller from a high-risk country must stand down for 10 days before continuing onto the Cook Islands.

The MIQ costs and more detailed information can be found on www.covid19.gov.ck

Group 3 will also be required to prove their immigration status.

The entry requirements will be enforced at the border by Immigration Officials, and failure to comply with the border entry regulations will result in travellers being denied entry to the country at the border.

Two weeks ago, our nation reached a new milestone, ninety-six percent of our eligible population in the Cook Islands are now fully vaccinated and 99% have had their first vaccine dose. This afternoon, thanks to the New Zealand government our third dose or booster dose of the Pfizer vaccination arrived and from 8 am tomorrow morning Te Marae Ora staff will be rolling out the doses as well as offering first and second doses to all who are eligible and now want to be vaccinated.

The best weapons we have had available to us in this battle have been our isolation and closed borders, and now mass vaccination. As a government, we have to deal with the whole population, and like every major government around the world, the course open to us has been to secure and administer doses of vaccines with proven efficacy like the Pfizer vaccine.

It has been safely administered to hundreds of millions of people around the world with proven beneficial results, and negligible serious negative results.

To protect our people, even more, we need to vaccinate our five to 11-year-olds as soon as the vaccine is cleared for that age group by MedSafe in New Zealand. Close to thirty percent of the people in New Zealand who are now sick with COVID-19 in the latest outbreak are children in that age group.

Why should our people and children suffer, when the overseas experience tells us that more than 90% of people vaccinated – particularly with Pfizer – either avoid the virus or don't suffer serious illness and death. The figures around the world show clearly, that COVID-19 is overwhelming, an illness of the unvaccinated.

We have worked very very hard in the last two years to maintain our covid-free status, and these regulations and our continual drive to get all our eligible people vaccinated, is a continuation of that.

Vaccination is the best protection we have against this pandemic. The fewer unvaccinated people we have, the fewer chances the virus has to spread, it is an illness of the unvaccinated; and even if vaccinated people are sometimes infected, they tend not to get seriously ill or require hospitalisation, and they seldom die of the disease.”

To further contain and reduce the spread of this virus we must learn to live with the new norms of public health.

Face masks will be required on public transport, for workers in close proximity business, and required for entry into high-risk facilities. Wearing face masks is encouraged when in any public place.

CookSafe tag in will be mandatory for certain facilities and encouraged at all businesses and facilities.

Indoor facilities that have poor ventilation where activities such as singing takes place pose a high risk. There are no capacity restrictions if the facility only allows vaccinated members and guests but should the facility decide to allow unvaccinated members then it must impose a 100 person limit, maintain 1-meter physical distancing and require face masks to be worn. Children under 12 are exempted from this measure.

The decision not to vaccinate remains your personal decision however unvaccinated frontline workers involved in health, teaching and borders will be subject to Covid-19 surveillance testing as required by TMO.

All business and government agencies will be required to appoint a Covid-19 Health and Safety officer whom TMO will train to administer the new requirements.

Moving to our Pa Enea and after consultations with the Island Governments travel will be organised around 2 bubbles. Aitutaki is one bubble with Rarotonga and travellers to Aitutaki must be vaccinated and undergo a Rapid Antigen Test before departure.

The other Pa Enea are a separate bubble and in addition to the above conditions the traveller must stand down in Rarotonga for 7 days prior to travel.

Note that the vaccination requirement does not apply to those residents in the Cook Islands prior to 13 January and have not left the Cook Islands.

However, if despite our best efforts covid does get past our defences, we have made provisions to deal with any community transmission.

New Zealand like the Cook Islands is aiming for the highest possible vaccination rates in order to limit community transmission and the strategy is that with high vaccination rates any illness will have mild symptoms enabling people to be cared for at home and not overwhelm the hospital system.

Consequently, because we expect that if we get cases, most will be mild and can be managed and cared for in their own homes; with oversight by Public Health Nurses and Health Care Assistants operating from five health clinics in Rarotonga and supported by the ten Puna.

In Aitutaki a Taskforce will provide support to mildly affected patients being cared for at home. Part of the service will be a health care pack issued to affected households with simple devices which a well adult household member can use to check the patient's temperature, pulse and oxygen level; and report those details to the Public Health Nurse.

On Rarotonga moderate cases will be managed within a separate isolation facility, staffed by nurses and doctors. On Aitutaki the hospital will become the isolation facility for moderate cases.

Any severe cases we get will be transferred to and managed in the specially set up Te Kou Ward at Rarotonga hospital.

So you can see we have been giving this reopening and its consequences and how we might mitigate any downsides to opening, a lot of thought; and planning, as best we can, with the resources we have.

We can't hide from covid forever, for the best part of two years we have stayed closed and stayed home but we are seeing now the costs of our people leaving and the costs to the country have been very high.

We are now ready to open for business. I am pleased that we will provide this Christmas and New Year period with an opportunity for our frontline staff to have a break before we reopen on the 13th of January. Enjoy your break while you can.

Kia Orana tatou e Kia Manuia.

ENDS: Media enquiries to Jaewynn McKay; jaewynn.mckay@cookislands.gov.ck; +682 55486