



**Cook Islands Parliament Plenary Session  
Address by Honourable Mark Brown, Prime Minister  
Border Opening Health Readiness and Support – 3 December 2021**

Honourable Speaker,  
Members of Parliament,  
Members of the Public,  
Kia Orana

Yesterday afternoon 176 of our people returned home and are now in MIQ. All border staff, health staff, MFEM staff and the Edgewater staff, performed their roles diligently as they have done ever since our first repatriation flight last year. All the necessary precautions were taken as required as per the previous three cohorts.

At about 11.00pm last evening, the Day Zero test result of a 10-year-old boy returned positive for COVID-19.

Analysis by Te Marae Ora of the case indicates a weak positive which could mean a historical case or a recent infection. The person's pre-departure COVID-19 test result in New Zealand taken on 30 November was negative, the infection is therefore considered to be a recent infection.

The positive result came from a PCR test analysed at the Rarotonga hospital - with reported CT values of 36 and 40 – the medical professionals are assuming this is an early infection.

The mother of the 10-year-old is fully vaccinated, his two siblings, both under the age of 12 are not.

The family are all contained in the MIQ facility. So far, neither this positive case nor the other members of his family have shown any symptoms of the virus. They will all remain in MIQ until there is no risk of the virus getting into the wider community. This may take some time if other members of the family become infected.

All of the other 172 passengers have returned negative tests.

We have been preparing ourselves for the time we re-open our borders. Our testing regimes have shown the value of that preparation by catching this case at the border.

I want to reiterate that for many months we have been planning for how we handle the border reopening and dealing with any potential coronavirus threats, I further reiterate the importance for all eligible members of our population to be vaccinated, to give us that added layer of protection against serious illness and possible death.



The vaccine is still available to all eligible people, and once we have the all clear to do so, we will be offering the vaccination to our 5-11-year olds, protecting them from getting infected by the coronavirus.

The ability of this virus to cross borders can be seen worldwide, and that is why border workers wear Personal Protective Equipment and follow infection control procedures at work – to eliminate the risk of catching the virus through their work. As an added precaution TMO will be testing all of our border workers who met yesterday's flight. I will keep you posted if there are any further developments.

I hope you will join me in wishing the family a speedy recovery.

It is understood that the family followed all the prerequisite requirements in New Zealand and during their travel to Rarotonga. The overall analysis of the whole process including the risk to all the staff who worked the flight, at the border, during transportation and at the MIQ facility is considered low, but all staff will be required to undertake a PCR test on Day 3. All have been advised of the protocol between now and their test on Day 3. This is the new norm that Te Marae Ora has been discussing during the public consultations held recently.

These public consultations on Rarotonga and the Southern Group Pa Enea Islands gave Te Marae Ora the opportunity to prepare our people for the border opening.

Stakeholder meetings took place with the two other main pillars of our country, Te Are Ariki and the Religious Advisory Council. Meetings with the Opposition Office, the Private Sector Taskforce, the Tourism Industry Council, Air Rarotonga, Air New Zealand and other interested church and youth organizations also took place and were well received. The discussions that took place were honest and frank - prerequisites if we are to take our people with us on this next journey.

The Border Easement Taskforce which includes the Office of the Prime Minister, the Office of the Public Service Commissioner, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Ministry of Finance and Economic Management, Crown Law and Cook Islands Tourism, have, since the announcement by myself as Prime Minister of the border opening, continued doing all the necessary work to get our country ready for the 13 January opening. Part of that work was the amendment to the COVID-19 Act that we have supported and passed during this session.

Last Tuesday the 23 November 2021, Cabinet endorsed the request for financial support to stand-up the Puna system here on Rarotonga and also a similar arrangement for Aitutaki. These two islands are grouped in one standalone bubble. The rest of the Pa Enea are also grouped as one bubble.

Te Marae Ora is also working with the Puna Leads, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Cook Islands Red Cross in developing a medical care pack and an initial basic welfare pack to support families if and when they are required to self-isolate in their homes.

A medical care pack will also be provided to any visitor and their families should they also be required to self-isolate. These medical care packs will allow adults in the family



the ability to self-monitor and report their health conditions while self-isolating. Training and guidance will be provided by the Puna Public Health staff. The Puna will all be staffed by Public Health Nurses, Health Care Assistants, security, and support staff.

Te Marae Ora has ordered anti-viral COVID medications to treat at least 100 people with 'very severe' cases. This order may be increased to further support our readiness.

The most important factor to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and to protect ourselves, our families and our people is vaccination. I am truly pleased to announce that the Cook Islands has achieved an incredible milestone. 99% of our people aged 12 years and over, have received their 1<sup>st</sup> dose of the Pfizer vaccine and 96% of us aged over 12 are fully vaccinated. The vaccination of the 12 – 15-year-olds for the Northern Group will take place in the New Year.

And as the Minister of Health alluded to the 3<sup>rd</sup> shot will be available to the people of Aitutaki and Rarotonga first and we will have the 3<sup>rd</sup> shot available before the border opening.

The Cook Islands will be introducing the use of in-country rapid antigen testing. This will give us the ability to quickly test and identify the status of symptomatic people before undertaking full PCR testing should a person be identified positive from the rapid test.

This process will be more cost effective, non-invasive and will allow quick surveillance screening for any symptomatic persons, including visitors, on Rarotonga.

The same testing will be applied to any person traveling to Aitutaki and to the rest of the Pa Enuā. A testing area will be established at the domestic departure terminal at the airport.

Te Marae Ora advises that our Lab at the hospital has been certified and that training of the TMO Trainers will be held on the 13 December. These trainers will in turn train all the COVID-19 Health and Safety Officers on how to administer the rapid test for workplace employees or guests. This means, agencies, businesses and hotel accommodation providers will be required to appoint a Health and Safety Officer. TMO will then train these people to administer the rapid tests. TMO will remain responsible for testing our local population.

Te Marae Ora is also working with the New Zealand Ministry of Health in developing our digital travel vaccination certificate using the Cook Islands Vaccination ID Card. This card was introduced last year and many of our people have already purchased their card. However, due to the current development and to ensure the interoperability of our vaccination card with the New Zealand system, a reprint of those cards after embedding the vaccination QR Codes for each person, will be done at no charge.

Last month Te Marae Ora issued a public notice asking everyone who has been vaccinated to submit copies of their passport photo page or a copy of their birth certificate. This will then enable TMO staff to confirm their name matches the one in



the TMO MedTech system, and if not, it can be corrected before printing the final digital travel vaccination certificate.

In line with the New Zealand solution, our unique relationship with New Zealand allows us to have the same access as those living in New Zealand, to travel to other countries that New Zealand will bilaterally sign up to. Again, we are grateful to New Zealand's Government and Ministry of Health for their continued partnership and close co-operation with Te Mare Ora as we prepare and ready ourselves for the border opening.

The rules will change from the 13 January 2022, any Cook Islander returning home who is not vaccinated will be placed in MIQ and will pay the full MIQ cost that will be determined by the Ministry of Finance and the host resort.

Cohort 4 that arrived yesterday, will be the last funded managed return by our government.

Other new Border Travel Requirements and the new Public Health Measures for the border opening will be released once the Cook Islands COVID Protection Framework is endorsed by Cabinet in the coming week. This will be supported by public communications to fully explain and provide our wider community the understanding of the new requirements ahead of the border opening on the 13 January 2022.

We as a country has been tested over the past 2 years and we have stood up to those tests and I have no doubt that we will continue to be tested in the coming year and I have no doubt that we will continue to prevail

And may I finish Mr Speaker with a verse from Timothy 2 Timothy 1:7 - For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind