



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

MEDIA RELEASE
PRIME MINISTER'S UPDATE RE BORDER OPENING
6 January 2022

Kia orana tatou katoatoa,

It's only been a few days since I last spoke to you all, but with so much going on in the lead-up to our border opening on January 13, I felt it was important to give you all another update.

Before we get into that though, I would like to again wish everyone a Happy New Year, and I hope that all of you have been able to make the most of some holiday time with your family members and loved ones.

I know that for many of our hard-working government officials and staff, you have had to work through this holiday break on some very important work on of the entire country, and to those who have been working through, I offer my sincere thanks and appreciation for your efforts – they have not gone unnoticed.

Over the past week or so, most of you should have hopefully seen some of the official information being put out by our health ministry Te Marae Ora regarding what we all need to be doing to keep our communities safe both in the lead-up to our border opening date on January 13 and beyond.

If you haven't come across any of this yet, make sure you check it out as soon as you can – the best way to find out what you need to know is by visiting the Government COVID-19 website, the TMO website, or by following the COVID-19 Facebook page.

This information from TMO is all to do with public health measures that we all need to take onboard and be a part of, and that will help keep all of us safe.

These new health-related rules and regulations will be coming into effect on January 13 and for the most part they are in line with what has now become common practice in the vast majority of nations around the world.

They include things like the mandatory wearing of face masks in certain situations, for instance in all venues, businesses and other facilities defined as high-risk by

TMO – and on all public transport, which includes all buses and aircraft, as well as passenger vehicles used for transfers to and from the airport.

People entering high-risk facilities must also have proof of vaccination, otherwise the person in control of the premises must impose certain restrictions such as a 100-person limit, mask-wearing rules, and one-metre physical distancing. These rules do not apply to children under 12 years of age.

Certain businesses and services, as well as gatherings of more than 100 people, will also be required to have contact tracing systems in place, and businesses, services and government must appoint a Covid-19 health and safety officer. We currently have 319 Covid-19 health and safety officers registered and their number will continue to increase.

Mask-wearing will not be mandatory in other public settings that do not fall into any of the categories I have mentioned, but it is always highly encouraged and recommended by our health professionals, and businesses can themselves decide to impose standards that exceed the health regulations.

Diligent use of our CookSafe contact-tracing tools, the CookSafe QR card and CookSafe+ app, is also strongly encouraged, as is the observance of basic health and hygiene measures

Some of you may not realise it, but all these measures and more have simply become a way of life for most of the world's population now – and while we here in the blessed Cook Islands have avoided the worst impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, the time has come for us to take these necessary precautions to properly protect ourselves from this virus.

Remember too, that thanks to the Cook Islands having one of the highest vaccination rates in the entire world – more than 97% of our eligible 12 years old and over population has now had at least two doses of the vaccine – these precautions are not a last-ditch defence against Covid-19 but instead act as basic added safeguards that provide us all with yet another layer of protection, both for ourselves and most importantly for the more vulnerable among us.

With protecting all our people against Covid-19 in mind, Government has invested much time and expertise in the creation of our Cook Islands Covid-19 Response Plan, this is a plan outlining how we can best mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the health, social and economic status of our country.

In setting out a safe framework for how we will go about protecting Cook Islanders from Covid-19 once our border opens on January 13, the Response Plan identifies four main action areas, three of which are the requirements for entry to the Cook Islands, requirements on arrival in the Cook Islands, and requirements for travel to the Pa Enea.

These key areas of concern will be managed via multiple layers of protection protocols, including stringent Covid testing, vaccination requirements, travel stand-downs, home isolation and managed quarantine.

The fourth main action area is to do with public health measures within the community, and I have already mentioned some of the ways in which we can all contribute to this.

In addition, TMO now have in place 50 new standard operating procedures and policies to deal with Covid-19 should it ever arrive on our shores. The 'Clinical Escalation Pathway' has been put in place to manage any potential Covid-19 cases as best as possible outside of the hospital setting and minimise any undue pressure on our facilities.

This strategy, combined with our high vaccination rates, border controls and other public health measures, means it is highly unlikely that the Cook Islands will have to employ more drastic measures or targeted interventions such as lockdowns or other restrictions.

There is of course much more to all these new plans and procedures than what I am able to go over with you here today and for the past three months our government agencies have continued to put in place the necessary protocols, infrastructure, legislation, and resourcing of community health clinics to support the implementation of what we call our Cook Islands Covid-19 Safe Framework.

These new plans and procedures come at a cost, but Cabinet has recently approved in principle \$10 million from the Covid-19 Medical Response Fund to cover the additional capital and operating expenses to support the preparatory work required to open our borders on January 13, and both TMO and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management continue to work towards having all necessary resources in place.

We all have our part to play, but as January 13 approaches you can rest assured that what your Government has done, is doing, and will continue to do, is everything it can to ensure not only a safe and efficient border opening, but also the continued protection of the entire Cook Islands from Covid-19.

We are ready, we are prepared, and we are protected. Now it's time.

Kia orana e kia manuia.

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