

OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER
HON MARK BROWN
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS
PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH DRAFT
COVID-19 UPDATE APRIL 8
8 APRIL 2022

Kia orana tatou katoatoa,

So here we are, another week into our Covid-19 outbreak, but also another week closer to coming out the other side.

New case numbers appear to be levelling off this week – on Monday we had a high of 189 positive cases, with numbers dropping down to 160 each day for both Tuesday and Wednesday, and 136 positive cases yesterday, so we will be monitoring closely to see if this trend continues.

As at 8am this morning we have recorded a total of 3171 positive cases to date, with 2319 recovered and 852 currently active.

We also have 1080 individual household contacts in quarantine right now, for a total of 1932 people either in isolation or quarantine.

We are seeing the peaking of infections now, so with the additional people in isolation – this is when we will be at our busiest. Both our TMO staff and puna staff are seeing this now which is why all of us must take on more personal responsibility – from things like self testing and looking out for each other. I know that businesses are also feeling the pinch which is why I am so glad we made the essential worker passes available to ease the load. It is pleasing to see so many of us helping those in isolation by delivering food and essential bottles of supplies. That is our Kia Orana spirit in action – lets keep it up. For most of us it is only 7 days that we are being asked to isolate.

Our Essential Worker Pass scheme is doing a good job of easing these pressures however, with 700 worker passes issued so far.

Meitaki maata to Emergency Management Cook Islands, Te Marae Ora and Cook Islands Tourism and all the other agencies involved for ensuring a rapid and smooth rollout of this process to allow people to still be able to work.

On the labour front last week I announced amendments we would be making to our entry requirements to take effect from the 1st May which would support the entry of international workers. I am pleased that Air New Zealand has just announced a special one-way airfare for newly recruited workers travelling from Fiji to the Cook Islands to coincide with our 1 May start date. I am informed by my immigration officials that processing has been underway over the last weeks for 40 workers already.

With up to 40 seats available on each flight until the end of June, and daily flights planned from Nadi from 1 May, this removes the need for a costly charter flight and will give our Cook Islands businesses another much-needed option in terms of recruiting new staff, especially when our arrivals numbers are increasing.

We are all in the same boat, all in this together. So let's give our businesses and government departments a little slack during this busy time of highest isolations. Patience is a virtue at this time and a smile goes a long way to showing your appreciation and understanding.

Our current advice from TMO is that in Rarotonga the outbreak is about to peak in the next week, and the number of new cases per day should begin to drop away from then onwards.

At the same time, cases in Aitutaki are growing, with a total of 34 active cases there today and more expected in the coming weeks.

This is exactly how we hoped this outbreak would play out, allowing us to shift the attention and focus of our health services towards Aitutaki just as case numbers in Rarotonga are beginning to decrease.

Accordingly, we will be relaxing a few more public health measures in Rarotonga this coming week, and we are also looking at dropping all travel restrictions to Aitutaki by May 1, with discussions on that currently underway with the island government.

Also From next Thursday, April 14, RAT tests will no longer be required for contact sport on Rarotonga – although this requirement will remain in place for contact sport on Aitutaki.

Also from the 14 April on Rarotonga we are increasing the indoor gathering limit to 100 and having no limits for outdoor gatherings altogether. Aitutaki restrictions remain at 50 indoor and 100 outdoor limit for the next two weeks at least.

Looking further ahead to May, we are also considering removing the need for inbound travellers to the Cook Islands to undergo a pre-departure RAT or PCR test. Australia are set to remove this as a requirement of entry to their country from April 18 and the expectation is that we will follow theirs and New Zealand's lead soon after.

With regard to Pa Enea travel, at this stage we are looking at a border opening date of April 18 for Southern group and April 25 northern group. I expect to discuss this matter directly with our Island Councils and TMO in the next week.

Reopening passenger travel to the Pa Enea is the next logical step to including all of our people in our recovery. The government will be prepared to provide all necessary services and support to manage the virus as it passes through our islands. Our very high vaccination rate is the reason why we have no hospitalisations to date – we expect that this will also be the case for our Pa Enea.

Our situation is changing as we overcome this virus, I would like to again remind all of our people that it is still very important that we continue to maintain the basic everyday health and safety measures that by now we should have all gotten used to observing.

This means continuing to wear masks where appropriate, continuing those good basic hygiene habits, get tested if you have symptoms and continuing to properly isolate or quarantine when directed.

If we continue to all do our bit – we will get through this in good shape.

Stay safe everyone, and may God continue to bless us all.

Kia orana tatou katoatoa, e kia manuia.

ENDS