



25 May 2022

VaccinesPlusNZ
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Dear members of VaccinesPlusNZ

Thank you for your correspondence of 26 April 2022 about the implementation of a strengthened Vaccines Plus mitigation strategy towards New Zealand's COVID-19 response.

I would like to assure you that implementing and clearly communicating a coherent mitigation strategy is a core function of the COVID-19 response. We currently do this through the COVID-19 Protection Framework which is underpinned by a minimisation and protection approach. Measures under the Framework are regularly revised to ensure the response is proportionate, while protecting New Zealand's most vulnerable populations and minimising the impact on the health system. Improving health outcomes has always been a priority of this Government and that is no exception for the COVID-19 response.

I note your recommendation around increasing public education about airborne transmission. I can assure you that officials from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) and the Ministry of Education (MoE) are actively working on increasing understanding around airborne transmission. It is anticipated that detailed advice for the public will be available prior to the winter season.

Government messaging for some time has indicated that N95 masks provide additional protection to medical masks. However, there are challenges around the supply of these masks to the public due to operational and equity concerns. Currently, the provision of N95 masks is based on a risk-based approach which is in line with the Framework. We supply N95 masks predominantly to health care workers and require evidence of fit testing before supply is arranged. You may be interested to know that we are distributing medical masks to the vulnerable and priority populations through community providers in preparation for a surge in winter. I receive regular advice from Ministry of Health officials and may make further decisions around mask requirements as the response evolves.

As you are aware, at the Orange setting of the Framework, we strongly encourage that face masks continue to be worn by students and staff in years 4 and above when indoors. Many schools found the requirement to wear masks at the Red setting challenging for both students and teachers. Mask-wearing does not come without educational, social and developmental costs and can impair verbal and non-verbal communication between teachers and students. The safety of staff and students is at the forefront of decision making, and all perspectives were considered on the issue of the school mask mandate for winter 2022.

Despite mask-wearing not being a legal requirement, many schools continue to have a strong mask-wearing culture, alongside other key health measures including good ventilation of indoor spaces, good hygiene and cleaning practices, appropriate physical distancing wherever possible, plenty of fresh air breaks and staying home when unwell. It is worth noting that schools can decide to apply additional health measures, above and beyond legal requirements based on their own risk assessments. For example, schools may decide that face masks are required indoors at the Orange setting because the vaccination rate in their community is low, transmission is currently high in the community, or they have a high number of immunocompromised staff or students. They may also choose to require mask use where larger groups of students congregate, such as at assemblies, or continue to require visitors to wear masks when indoors.

With regard to supplying CO2 monitoring and air filtration units to all classrooms, opening windows and doors is the best way to boost the flow of fresh air in classrooms. However, where opening doors and windows is not practical, MoE has a programme of work in place to ensure that CO2 monitors and portable air cleaners are made available to state and state-integrated schools. This includes both Government provision and options for schools to invest in their own, additional devices. As at the end of April 2022, MoE has provided:

- 2,561 CO2 monitors to 2,439 schools, with a further stock of 2,000 monitors in the country that will be distributed to schools throughout May 2022; and
- 2,193 portable air cleaners to 1,459 schools.

In addition to the above, the Ministry of Health is in ongoing discussions with MBIE regarding engaging engineers and ventilation specialists to develop clear ventilation standards for indoor spaces.

The Government recently committed an additional \$11 million to support distance and hybrid learning in all schools through the Omicron peak. The additional funding will support the continuation of distance and hybrid learning measures that many schools are already delivering, including developing teaching resources, printing and couriers, and access to online learning subscriptions. Schools will continue to be open for onsite, face-to-face learning as long as they can do so safely. I can assure you that we recognise the significant benefits to students attending school, from both a learning and wellbeing perspective and that schools need plans in place to continue teaching and learning in the event of significant staff and student absences. MoE continues to provide guidance and support for schools to deliver hybrid models of learning which you can read more about at: www.learningfromhome.govt.nz/distance-learning/advicefor-teachers/advice-for-school-teachers-and-leaders.

I note your request to continue promoting high vaccination rates for all groups, particularly children. I can confirm there is ongoing work to drive vaccine uptake in children, as well as boosters for those who are eligible. The Ministry of Health is working with schools, and district health boards (DHBs) to increase vaccination uptake. DHBs have found that the primary way they have been able to increase uptake is by hosting vaccine clinics on or near school grounds. The Ministry of Health is providing support to DHB efforts to increase the number of schools supporting on-site vaccination clinics.

Smaller campaigns known as Vaccine Sprints are also being held throughout New Zealand. These are joint drives between DHBs, Māori Health providers and communities to increase vaccination rates, particularly for Māori. These initiatives are supported through local and national communication campaigns to inform people of the need to get vaccinated. DHBs have maintained capacity to support a variety of places to administer COVID-19 vaccines. These include DHB clinics, general practitioners, and pharmacies. Pop up clinics and outreach services also remain important delivery mechanisms.

I would like to thank you for sharing the recommendations for changes to New Zealand's COVID-19 response. I note the recommendations outlined in your correspondence and will consider these as we continue to respond to the evolving situation. As you will be aware, our response continues to be informed by the latest public health advice and emerging evidence and we will continue to adapt as appropriate.

Thank you again for writing.

Yours sincerely



Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response