BRIEFING

Quarantine-Free Travel with Australia: Options for responding to higher-risk travellers

Date:	19 March 2021	Priority:	Urgent
Security classification:		Tracking number:	2021-2908

Action sought

	Action sought	Deadline
Hon Chris Hipkins **Minister for COVID-19 Response**	**Discuss** the contents of this briefing and A3 with officials	22 March 2021

Contact for telephone discussion (if required)

Name	Position	Telephone	1st contact
Kara Isaac	General Manager, MIQ Policy	Privacy of natural persons	✓
Privacy of natural persons	Manager, Allocation and Supply		

The following departments/agencies have been consulted

Minister's office to complete:

- ☐ Approved
- ☐ Noted
- ☐ Seen
- ☐ See Minister's Notes

- ☐ Declined
- ☐ Needs change
- ☐ Overtaken by Events
- ☐ Withdrawn

Comments

BRIEFING

MINISTRY OF BUSINESS, INNOVATION & EMPLOYMENT
HĪKINA WHAKATUTUKI

Quarantine-Free Travel with Australia: Options for responding to higher-risk travellers

Date:	19 March 2021	Priority:	Urgent
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Purpose

To outline options for how the managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) system could respond to the predicted increase in high-risk travellers entering MIQ that will result from commencing Quarantine-Free Travel with Australia, including advice on how MBIE could operationalise an additional contingency as part of this transition.

Recommended action

The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment recommends that you:

a   **Note** under current arrangements, Australians who enter managed isolation in the 14 days prior to the commencement of Quarantine-Free Travel will need to complete the standard 14 days of managed isolation.

Noted

b   **Note** commencing Quarantine-Free Travel with Australia will 'free up' capacity in Managed Isolation Facilities that would have been used by travellers from Australia.

Noted

c   **Note** if these freed-up rooms are filled with travellers from other origins, they will likely present a higher overall COVID-19 risk profile than travellers from Australia.

Noted

d   **Note** officials have prepared three options to respond to the changes in traveller risk profile, including how to operationalise additional contingency rooms.

Noted

e   **Agree** to discuss these options with officials at your meeting on Monday 22 March.

Agree / Disagree

Kara Isaac
General Manager
MIQ Policy, MBIE

19.3.21

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

24.3.21

Context

1. New Zealand and Australia have been working towards the introduction of Quarantine Free Travel (QFT) between our countries for several months. QFT with Australia is expected to commence in April 2021.

2. As travellers from Australia who arrive in New Zealand prior to the commencement of QFT will have to spend 14 days in a MIF, we anticipate we will begin to see changes in capacity prior to the commencement of QFT.

3. Australia is the most common port of origin for travellers entering MIQ. Initial analysis suggests that QFT with Australia will free up between 1,000 and 1,300 rooms per fortnight, around 30% of MIQ capacity.

4. Travellers from other parts of the world have a higher risk of arriving in New Zealand COVID-19 positive. If rooms previously used by low-risk travellers from Australia are filled with high-risk travellers from other parts of the world, the risk profile of our Managed Isolation Facilities (MIFs) will increase, and create additional strain on the MIQ system, including the workforce.

Options for using this capacity

5. You have indicated that you do not wish to replace all Australian travellers with higher-risk travellers from other countries by releasing all 'freed-up' managed isolation capacity onto MIAS for booking by other travellers.

6. Of the rooms freed up by QFT, you have stated a preference to keep 500 rooms offline as a buffer in the event that QFT is paused. This would be in addition to the 400+ rooms currently held in contingency.

7. Officials have come up with three options for how to respond to the potential increase in higher-risk travellers in our facilities, taking your preferences into account. The A3 at Annex One sets out these options in detail.

8. All options involve decreasing our operational capacity, either by decommissioning facilities or increasing contingency. The key choices needed are to do with how a contingency is operationalised and whether to focus on a particular region/facility or spread the reduction in capacity across the system.

Option One: Increase contingency rooms [recommended]

9. Reduction in capacity across the system (eg running all facilities at 80-85% capacity) would improve the staff to returnee ratio and allow more time for rooms to be cleaned and maintenance to be carried out. Rooms could be made available to manage planeloads of passengers in the air in the event QFT is paused, though there would still be a risk that numbers of passengers in the air to a given location would exceed MIQ availability at that location.

Option Two: Stand-alone contingency only facilities

10. Taking a facility offline but not fully decommissioning it would allow for the facility to be emptied and deep cleaning and minor maintenance to be carried out. Facilities would remain available should an increase in capacity be needed, though it would take several days to bring them back online. Facilities would not be available to respond to planeloads of passengers due to the time needed to bring them back online.

Option Three: Permanently decommission 2-3 MIFs

11. Decommissioning facilities (eg not renewing contracts for our two Wellington facilities) would respond to the increase of high-risk travellers by decommissioning the facilities/locations that have higher risk profiles. However, this would not increase our contingency buffer in the event that QFT is paused or suspended.

Next steps

12. Discuss these options with officials on Monday 22 March.

13. Further detailed advice will be provided when you have indicated which option you prefer.

14. Officials will review these settings after two months of QFT with Australia.

Annexes

Annex One: Options for responding to higher-risk travellers A3

QUARANTINE FREE TRAVEL WITH AUSTRALIA – OPTIONS FOR RESPONDING TO HIGHER RISK TRAVELLERS

OPTIONS	PROS	CONS	IMPLEMENTATION
1) INCREASE CONTINGENCY ROOMS ACROSS THE SYSTEM [Recommended] Increase our contingency by reducing the level of occupancy in MIFs across our portfolio.	• Rooms could be used to help manage planeloads of passengers in the air in the event of QFT pause (with logistical planning). • Rooms would be immediately available, as they would be within fully staffed and operational facilities • Better staff to returnee ratio in facilities. • Reduction in the risk of in-facility transmission by limiting opportunities for mingling by having greater separation between returnees. • These rooms could also be used to facilitate the return of a small number of New Zealanders in the event of a QFT suspension (emergency allocation criteria could be used to prioritise). • Could be used to support the full implementation of cohort management. • The contingency would be more spread-out across our portfolio, meaning we are better positioned to respond to a range of situations across New Zealand. • Hotels are best run at 80% occupancy	• Room wastage - a number of rooms would sit empty across our portfolio. • Hotels are paid a lower rate for contingency rooms; may not be attractive for some hotels. • A reduction in MIQ operational capacity may exacerbate wait-times for other arrivals. • While these rooms could be allocated to New Zealanders in urgent need following a QFT suspension, there are equity issues to be considered in terms of not having done this sooner to facilitate the return of other New Zealanders stranded overseas or experiencing difficulties in returning home. • No reduction in the number of internal domestic transfers. • Could be a mismatch between where planes are going and where our contingency is held, especially given its spread-out nature. For example, a planeload coming into Queenstown would not be able to go into a MIF. Similarly, a planeload coming into Wellington might exceed available capacity.	• Reduction in capacity would be across facility e.g. we would aim for 80-85% occupancy for all facilities across our portfolio. • Number of MIQFs in our portfolio would remain the same.
2) STAND-ALONE CONTINGENCY ONLY FACILITIES Increase our contingency by putting whole facilities on 'stand-by'	• Would create a more visible and concrete contingency 'buffer'. • While facilities are on standby some deep cleaning and/or minor repairs and upgrades could be undertaken. • The full impact of the Ventilation Review is not currently fully understood. Holding a number of facilities in contingency offline would provide us with some flexibility if any ventilation systems in our portfolio needed to be upgraded post-review. • Potentially fewer internal domestic transfers to manage. • Workforce for the facilities could be fully rested. • Contingency MIFs could be used to facilitate the return of a number of New Zealanders from Australia in the event of a QFT suspension.	• This option could not be used to respond to planeloads in the air in the event of a QFT pause as it would take some time for these facilities to come back online (2-3 days). • Hotels are paid a lower rate for contingency rooms – risk that some hotels may not choose to renew their contracts should they be identified as a stand-alone contingency facility. • Retention of workforce may prove an issue. • Same downside applies as per option 1 above in terms of the optics of using standalone facilities to facilitate the return of stranded New Zealanders in Australia and not doing this sooner for other stranded Kiwis. • Empty unused facilities are likely to be perceived negatively. • Room wastage (as above).	• This would likely involve emptying a number of facilities and putting these on 'stand-by' so they would be available for use if needed. It may take 2-3 days to bring a facility back online. • Number of MIQFs in our portfolio would remain the same. • All staff for our facilities would need to be retained given that it would be difficult to stand-up a workforce at short notice. MBIE would also need to carry the costs of having these facilities sitting empty • We could rotate facilities going offline as part of a rolling schedule.
3) PERMANENTLY DECOMMSSION 2-3 MIFs Respond to increased risk profile by decommissioning least fit-for-purpose facilities	• Fewer facilities to manage would reduce the workload for our health and security workforces. • Freed-up health workforce could focus on other priorities e.g. vaccine rollout. • Likelihood of fewer internal transfers to manage, if a whole region is decommissioned. • We would decommission facilities with known challenges (e.g. significant ventilation remediation required, MIFs without outdoor exercise spaces).	• No increase to contingency buffer. • Decommissioned MIFs would not be able to be recommissioned easily (if at all). • Reduced capacity means fewer travellers (e.g. critical workers) can be accommodated. • Increased number of complaints for MBIE to manage. • New Zealand citizens may face significantly increased wait times in trying to secure an MIQ space, increasing the Crown's BORA risk.	• This would result in a permanent reduction to our overall operational capacity. • Would take up to one month to permanently decommission a MIF.