



# Adapting to Omicron

National's ten-point  
plan to upgrade our  
Covid response

2022

## Foreword



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New Zealanders have sacrificed a lot over the last two years in the fight against Covid. First, through strong collective effort we eliminated the virus from New Zealand, preventing illness and saving lives.

New Zealanders' sacrifices bought the Government time to prepare and improve our Covid defences. It gave us the opportunity to learn from other countries and do things better. It gave us a head start to do things like vaccinate at pace, upgrade our hospitals and classrooms, and expand MIQ.

Unfortunately, the Government squandered that extra time, and opportunities to improve our response have been lost.

The Government delivered the slowest vaccine rollout in the developed world so when Delta arrived, less than 20 percent of the population were fully vaccinated, forcing us into another lockdown.

Instead of building ICU beds or bringing in nurses from overseas, they pushed ahead with a dangerous and disruptive restructure of the entire health system in the middle of a pandemic.

The Government has been negligently slow to embrace other types of testing in addition to nasal PCR testing, such as saliva PCR testing and rapid antigen tests.

With the arrival of Omicron, New Zealand's Covid strategy needs an urgent upgrade. We can't rely on what worked in 2020, and we certainly can't make the same mistakes the Government made in 2021 that led to an \$8 billion lockdown, thousands of Kiwis not even eligible for a booster shot yet, and thousands more shut out of their own country.

New Zealanders deserve a Government with the foresight and the plan to confront the challenges of Omicron head on.

Omicron's arrival in New Zealand will be unsettling for many. We will get through the challenge by working together, and by adopting a new approach of managing Covid in the community. This document contains ten sensible ideas to improve the Government response and we urge the Government to adopt them.

A blue ink signature of Christopher Luxon, written in a cursive style.

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Leader of the Opposition

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Spokesperson for COVID-19 Response

## Our goal

Part of the confusion and anxiety caused by the Government over the last 12 months has been its refusal to clearly state what its objective is when it comes to Covid.

2020 was all about elimination, but when that failed in 2021 and Delta arrived, the Government was too slow to adapt. 2022 needs to be all about pivoting to managing Covid in the New Zealand community.

Covid is here now, and it isn't going away. That will be worrying for many people. The anxiety will be heightened by the fact the government doesn't know what it wants to achieve. With Omicron, the Government has both suggested we will have thousands of cases but also that we are aiming to 'stamp it out'.

From the experience of other countries and the advice of health experts and modellers here, we know that Omicron is likely to spread through the country extremely rapidly.

While it may be milder on average than previous variants and won't cause serious problems for most people who catch it, Omicron is still dangerous and will still lead to serious illness and, tragically, death for some.

Therefore, our objectives in dealing with the Omicron wave should be clear:

1. Slow the spread and ensure the health system is not overwhelmed;
2. Minimise disruption as a result of isolation requirements; and
3. Allow as much economic and social freedom as possible, subject to 1 and 2.

## Our plan at a glance

**1. Accelerate boosters and youth vaccines**

**2. Update the testing regime with rapid tests**

**3. Increase use of high-quality masks**

**4. Shorten isolation periods and fix community support**

**5. Increase access to Covid treatments**

**6. End MIQ and let stranded Kiwis come home**

**7. Reinforce the health system**

**8. Clarify available financial support**

**9. Ensure children can learn safely**

**10. Specify the criteria for removing restrictions**

# Ten point plan to upgrade our Covid response

The Omicron variant has arrived in New Zealand and case numbers are set to increase rapidly in the coming weeks and months. That means we are entering a new, challenging phase of the pandemic and we need to update our strategy. As we have consistently done over the last two years, the National Party is offering constructive proposals we believe the Government should adopt today. This plan would help ensure we safely navigate our way through Omicron so we can begin to restore our freedoms, reunite families and get on with addressing the many other long-term problems facing New Zealand.

## 1. Accelerate boosters and youth vaccines

The Government was late to order vaccines and, despite claiming we would be at the front of the queue, New Zealand ended up with one of the slowest vaccine rollouts in the developed world. That failure meant that when Delta arrived, less than 20 percent of the population was fully protected, leading to a gruelling three-month, \$8 billion lockdown for Auckland.

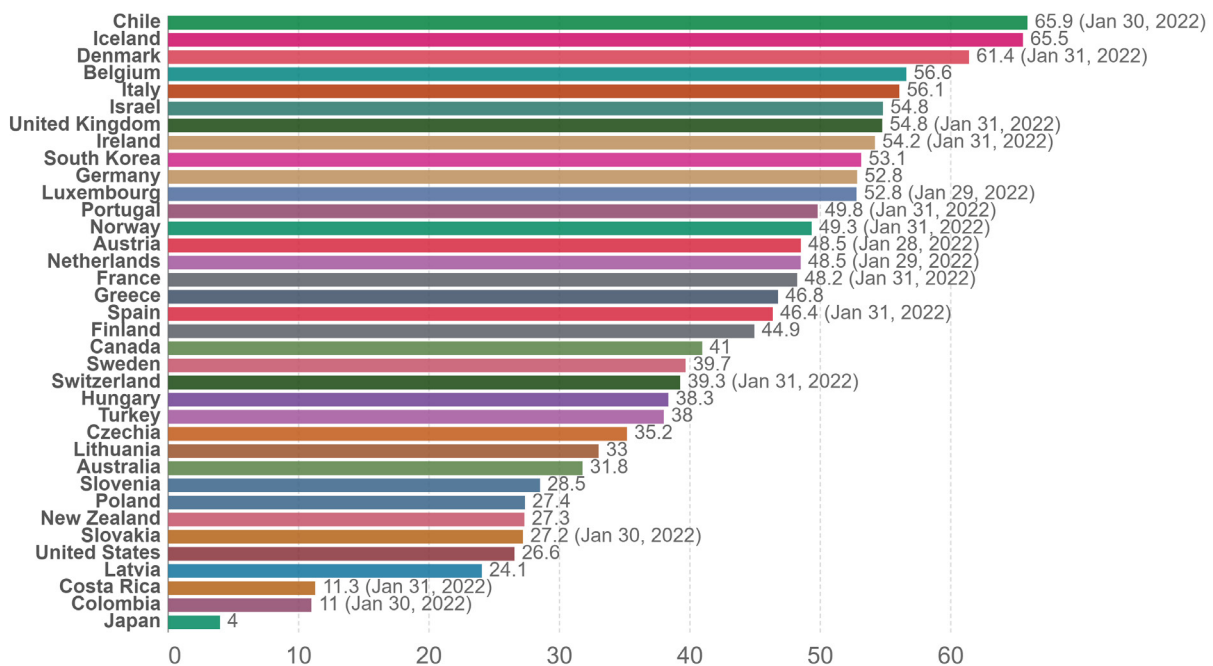
As a consequence of that slow initial rollout, we are once again well behind when it comes to booster shots. At the moment, we have the seventh lowest booster rate in the OECD. Meanwhile, the Government has shown a complete lack of urgency when it comes to speeding up approvals for teenagers and children to be able to get fully vaccinated and boosted.

With Omicron here and set to spread rapidly, we have a small window to surge the vaccine rollout and ensure as many New Zealanders as possible are protected from serious illness.

### COVID-19 vaccine boosters administered per 100 people, Feb 1, 2022



Total number of vaccine booster doses administered, divided by the total population of the country. Booster doses are doses administered beyond those prescribed by the original vaccination protocol.



Source: Official data collated by Our World in Data – Last updated 2 February 2022, 10:30 (London time)  
OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

### Actions

- Coordinate a vaccination surge to get our booster rate up, particularly among the most vulnerable; that means working with GPs, Māori health providers and community groups to inundate rest homes, retirement villages and at-risk communities with boosters.
- Speed up the vaccine rollout for 5-11 year olds with pop-up vaccination clinics in schools (with strict parental consent provisions in place).
- Expedite the process for approving boosters for under 18 year olds and consider a shorter gap between first and second doses for 5-11 year olds as some jurisdictions have done.
- Make the Novavax vaccine available once it is approved by Medsafe.

## 2. Update the testing regime with rapid tests

The explosion in cases we are expected to see as Omicron sweeps through the community means the tightly controlled nasal PCR testing regime the Government has been relying on is no longer fit for purpose. The priority now must be speed and availability, which means flooding the country with rapid antigen tests (RATs) that provide results within 15 minutes with reasonable accuracy.

Over the last year, National has called repeatedly for the Government to supplement PCR testing with RATs. At the very least they should have been stocking up on supply to prepare for a widespread outbreak.

Not only did the Government ignore these calls, but until recently they made it illegal to even import RATs. Now, having finally relented and allowed a select few companies to order a limited number of tests, the Government has been caught short and begun 'consolidating' those orders for itself. The Government needs to accept it made a mistake, stop stealing tests from business, and then pull out all the stops to close the gaps in our testing regime.

### Actions

- Stop the policy of requisitioning rapid antigen tests from private purchasers.
- Increase supply by immediately approving all of the RATs that have already been approved in Australia for use in New Zealand.
- Lift the ban on RATs and allow pharmacies and supermarkets to sell RATs.
- Immediately order sufficient RATs to ensure that supply is not a barrier to getting tested.
- Integrate at-home RATs with the contact tracing system to allow people to upload their results using a simple mobile app.
- Increase the opening hours for testing stations in our main centres; ideally these should be open 24/7 over the coming 2-3 months.
- Contract private sector companies offering saliva PCR testing to increase PCR capacity.

### 3. Increase use of high-quality masks

The Government has been slow to update guidance on masks in line with international evidence. For some time now, it has been clear that cloth masks are less effective against highly transmissible variants like Delta and Omicron.

With Omicron here, the Government should move quickly to distribute the gold standard respirator-style masks (N95, KN95 and P2) to all high-risk venues.

Given the vast majority of New Zealanders have until now been using cloth masks based on official advice, the Government should also move to speed up the transition to higher-quality masks that are more effective against Omicron.

#### Actions

- Require gold standard, fit-tested respirator-style masks (N95, KN95, P2) at all high-risk venues such as frontline healthcare, aged-care facilities and the border.
- Distribute gold standard masks to as many high-risk venues as possible, but particularly aged-care, border and frontline health facilities.
- Ensure high-quality (blue) surgical masks are widely available at pharmacies and supermarkets.



## 4. Shorten isolation periods & fix community support

Slowing the spread of Omicron means thousands of New Zealanders will need to self-isolate for some period over the coming months. The Government's current plan of requiring 14 days isolation for cases and 10 for contacts, reducing at some vague point in the future to 10 and 7, will cause significant disruption while creating a disincentive for people to actually get tested.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US, there is "accumulating evidence demonstrating the majority of transmission occurs during the early periods of infection", which is why they have recommended five days as the isolation period. Internationally, seven days is very common.

The system to support people who are self-isolating also needs to be dramatically improved. During the Delta outbreak there were a number of tragic incidents of people who required medical intervention not getting the help they needed. With the Omicron outbreak likely to result in far more people self-isolating, it's important to improve this system in a hurry.

### Actions

- Shorten the isolation period for close contacts and cases to seven days.
- Allow anyone who is a close contact and is asymptomatic to test to return to work using a RAT.
- Repurpose MIQ facilities (see below) for those who don't have appropriate places to isolate.
- Re-allocate resources from contact tracing teams as they become redundant to increase staffing at Healthline to support those isolating at home.
- Engage civil society groups, iwi, and the voluntary sector to distribute isolation care packs to support vulnerable people in the community in case they are required to self-isolate.

## 5. Increase access to Covid treatments

There are a variety of exciting new next-generation treatments that can reduce the worst Covid health outcomes. The Government needs to make sure we have a supply of these treatments as soon as possible and that approval for new treatments is expedited.

Treatments like Lagevrio (molnupiravir) and Paxlovid have both been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration in Australia, and regulatory bodies in the UK and the US, but New Zealand is still dragging its heels. In the UK, those at high risk already have access to both of these treatments.

With Omicron now in our community and cases set to increase rapidly, we need access to these next generation Covid treatments now.

### Actions

- Consider emergency authorisation of treatments that have already been approved by regulatory agencies in countries like the UK, Australia and the US.
- Secure sufficient supply of Covid treatments to ensure high-risk cases who need them can get early access.

## 6. End MIQ and let stranded Kiwis come home

Omicron is now established in the community, and cases are expected to hit the thousands within a matter of weeks. The rationale for MIQ, which was to keep Covid out of the community, is no longer valid.

With Covid in the community, the risk posed by additional Covid cases coming through the border is simply no longer big enough to justify the cruelty of preventing New Zealanders from returning to their own country.

The increase in cases from Omicron is also going to stretch our critical workforces even further. Despite promises to bring in additional nurses and teachers, there are still several hundred who have received visas but remain stuck offshore. We need to get them here tomorrow.

The time has come to end the lottery of human misery once and for all.





### Actions

- End mandatory MIQ stays for fully vaccinated, Covid-negative travellers and replace with self-isolation.
- Prioritise returning Kiwis as well as overseas critical health care workers, teachers, and other essential workers who have been issued work visas to also enter New Zealand via self-isolation.
- Move quickly to allow self-isolation for fully vaccinated, Covid-negative non-Kiwis such as tourists, international students and other visa categories.
- Repurpose MIQ facilities to provide those who don't have a suitable space to self-isolate at home with a safer option.

## 7. Reinforce the health system

The experience of Omicron overseas suggests the health system is highly likely to come under intense pressure over the coming weeks and months. There are a range of investments the Government should have been making over the last two years to prepare for this and, while it's now too late for many of these, there are still plenty of urgent actions the Government should take to prevent the system from becoming overwhelmed.

### Actions

- Plug the holes in our health care workforce by immediately bringing critical health care workers such as trained ICU nurses and specialists into the country (using self-isolation).
- Fast track credentialing for overseas health care workers who are already onshore and have passed required examinations but have not been able to complete work experience requirements.
- Work with the primary care sector (GPs, Māori health providers, pharmacists) to ensure they are prepared and resourced to deliver care and services to people self-isolating. This will include the ability to treat low-risk patients in their homes, deliver 24/7 health advice, and monitor patients in the community and at home.

## 8. Clarify available financial support

As cases increase due to Omicron, the number of people who are required to self-isolate will also skyrocket. While some workers and businesses will be able to continue operating through remote work, many others won't. Meanwhile some sectors – like tourism, hospitality, events and accommodation – could be particularly hard hit. The Government has signalled additional support for these sectors but without any detail, which makes business planning impossible.

## Actions

- Clarify what financial support will be available for businesses affected by widespread isolation requirements for their workers.
- Ensure all financial support is processed and released with minimal delay, so everyone who needs to isolate is able to.
- Provide details of the targeted support already promised for highly affected sectors so they can plan ahead and make critical decisions about their survival.

## 9. Ensure children can learn safely

New Zealand's children have missed out on a significant amount of schooling over the last two years. Unfortunately, with cases set to surge due to Omicron, it is inevitable that many schools will face at least another term of disruption.

Meanwhile, parents are rightly concerned that the delayed approval for teen and child vaccines mean their children have simply not had the chance to be fully vaccinated, let alone boosted.

As children return to school over the coming weeks, we need to adopt an approach that minimises the risk of the virus while allowing students and teachers to return safely to the classroom.



### Actions

- Provide every school with sufficient rapid antigen tests to conduct twice-weekly surveillance testing for all students, teachers and staff.
- Engage New Zealand scientists who are ventilation specialists to design best practice guidelines for classroom ventilation using the latest international evidence.
- Using the above information, conduct ventilation assessments in every school to identify areas of poor ventilation so these can be either addressed or avoided.
- Provide schools with CO2 monitors as a tool to assess ventilation, along with guidance on how to use them so schools can continue to monitor and improve ventilation and reduce the risk of rapid spread.
- Allow the hundreds of teachers who have been issued visas but are stuck offshore due to the lack of MIQ spaces to enter the country immediately and self-isolate (they must test negative before entering classrooms).

## 10. Specify the criteria for removing restrictions

Kiwis have sacrificed a lot over the last two years to keep people safe and avoid the worst impacts of the pandemic that have been seen overseas. We have complied with each new public health restriction and each new impingement on the freedoms and rights that, in normal times, would have been considered unconscionable. Kiwis have done this because it was necessary and it was clear to most that the trade-offs were worth it.

However, with Omicron here and set to spread through the country at a rapid pace, New Zealand will soon find itself in a similar position to a lot of other countries around the world who have had no choice but to live with Covid. So while New Zealand has undoubtedly come through Covid in a better position than many other countries, Omicron means it's now time to chart a pathway back to something closer to normal life.

The Government needs to provide Kiwis with some light at the end of the tunnel by signalling when the restrictions we are currently putting up with will come to an end. Nothing needs to be set in stone, but at the very least the New Zealand public deserve to know what the triggers will be - in terms of case numbers, booster coverage, or falling hospitalisation rates - for us to start removing restrictions, including:

- The move from Red to Orange to Green under the traffic light system.
- The eventual removal of gathering limits and restrictions on hospitality.
- When the vaccine pass system will no longer be required.
- At what point will vaccine mandates will be allowed to expire.



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