

Memo

Date: 7 December 2020

To: COVID-19 Vaccine and Immunisation Programme Steering Group (SG)

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From: Casey Pickett, Manager Public Health Policy

Subject: Non-residents eligibility for COVID-19 immunisation

For your: Direction

Purpose

This memo provides you with advice on whether non-residents in New Zealand should have access to publicly funded COVID-19 immunisation.

Summary

As part of the COVID-19 Immunisation Strategy and Programme, we need to clarify who in New Zealand will be eligible for publicly funded COVID-19 immunisation.

Most non-residents would not currently be eligible for publicly funded COVID-19 immunisation. We propose pursuing a new Ministerial Direction to expand eligibility for COVID-19 immunisation to anyone in New Zealand, which would include people on temporary visas (including work, student and visitor visas). This can support us to maximise uptake and work towards population immunity. It is also consistent with the principles set out in the COVID-19 Immunisation Strategy.

We expect that while there will be a fiscal cost, this can likely be absorbed within baseline while visitor numbers are low, unless uptake is substantially higher than expected.

The proposed approach will mean that any future policy work to relax border controls would need to consider the impact on COVID-19 immunisation, given that relaxing the borders would increase the number of people on temporary visas. For example, work could consider whether to only allow people on visitor visas in if they have been immunised, or whether they should remain eligible for publicly funded COVID-19 immunisation.

Action

Please provide any feedback or comment on the proposed policy position at the Steering Group meeting on 8 December 2020.

Recommendations

It is recommended that you:

1.	agree	To progress advice to Ministers on expanding eligibility for COVID-19 immunisation to anyone in New Zealand, which would include people on temporary visas	Yes/No
2.	agree	That we pursue a stand-alone Ministerial Direction to support this policy, rather than changes to contractual arrangements with DHBs.	Yes/No

Immigration status currently limits access to publicly funded immunisation...

Under clause B23 of the Health and Disability Services Eligibility Direction 2011 (the Direction) , a person who has, or is suspected of having, an infectious disease or a quarantinable disease are eligible for certain publicly funded services (including diagnosis and treatment) to address risks to others, irrespective of eligibility status.

COVID-19 testing and treatment services have been publicly funded for everyone in New Zealand under this clause. However, non-residents will not be eligible to publicly funded vaccines under this clause. Immunisation is preventative and will generally not be given to a person “who has, or is suspected of having, and infectious disease”.

Immunisation is publicly funded for eligible people specified in the Direction. In general, this would include all:

- Children
- New Zealand citizens (including people from Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau) and permanent residents
- Refugees and protected persons
- Australian citizens or permanent residents who have lived, or intend to live, in NZ for two years or more
- People with a valid work visa who will be in NZ for at least two years.

This means adults who will be in NZ for less than two years or people who are in NZ unlawfully would not be eligible for a publicly funded COVID-19 vaccine at present.

...but enabling anyone in New Zealand to access free COVID-19 vaccination supports our goal of population immunity over time

We need to encourage uptake of COVID-19 vaccines to work towards population immunity. Someone can transmit or become seriously ill from COVID-19 regardless of their residency status, and they could also place their whānau or community at risk of harm.

Of those living in New Zealand temporarily, as at October 2020 there are approximately 196,000 people with work visas, 68,000 people with student visas and 1,300 people with other temporary visas in New Zealand.¹ This includes Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) workers who may return to New Zealand regularly. As at April 2020, there were also approximately 55,000 people on visitor visas in New Zealand, most of whom were from India,

¹ MBIE, *Migration Data Explorer*, retrieved on 27 November 2020 from: https://mbie.shinyapps.io/migration_data_explorer/.

China and Great Britain.² All up, this could mean approximately 320,000 non-residents are in New Zealand.

We do not have data on how many Australian citizens or permanent residents would not currently be eligible for publicly funded health services, such as immunisation. Nor do we have data on the number of people in New Zealand unlawfully, though some of this group may be particularly vulnerable to the risks of contracting and transmitting COVID-19.

We recommend that anyone in New Zealand should be eligible for publicly funded COVID-19 immunisation

In **Appendix one** we have assessed the option to expand access to free COVID-19 immunisation to anyone in New Zealand against the COVID-19 Immunisation Strategy principles.

Based on this assessment, we **recommend expanding eligibility to COVID-19 immunisation to anyone in New Zealand**. This option is consistent with the draft advice from the National Ethics Advisory Committee:

*From an epidemiological perspective, all individuals living in a geographic area (such as New Zealand) must be considered as part of the immunisation programme, regardless of their immigration status. This includes all non-residents currently living in, or unable to leave, New Zealand.*³

We will continue to work with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) on whether any non-residents could be covered by reciprocal health agreements, and what other countries are doing.⁴

While any reciprocal agreements would be unlikely to change our policy position of broad eligibility, they could be used to support New Zealanders overseas to be immunised.

We are also consulting with Immigration Policy in the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE). Their initial feedback is that they are likely to be broadly supportive, but we are waiting for further input. We will report back if it is likely that we will need to make any changes to our policy position.

There is an interface between border settings and visitors' access to COVID-19 Immunisation

There is an interface between access to COVID-19 immunisation and border controls. The number of people on visitor visas (**NB:** this does not include those on work-related or student visas, such as RSE workers) who could access publicly funded COVID-19 immunisation will remain low where strict border controls are in place. These controls mean that comparatively few people on visitor visas are arriving in New Zealand, and they must have an approved reason. Only 8,550 overseas visitors arrived in September 2020 (Statistics NZ).

² MBIE, *Tourism Data Factsheet*, released 1 May 2020, <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/dmsdocument/11382-tourism-data-factsheet-covid-19-response-4-may-2020>.

³ National Ethics Advisory Committee, *Ethics and Equity: Resource Allocation and COVID-19: An Ethics Framework to Support Decision Makers* (draft version, 2020).

⁴ For example, Australia will be covering all visa holders except those on tourist or transit visas.

There are also visitors who are currently unable to leave New Zealand to return to their home country, whose access to publicly funded COVID-19 immunisation can help us work towards population immunity.

However, it may not be cost effective for the Government to fund COVID-19 immunisation for large numbers of people on visitor visas who will only be staying in New Zealand for a short time. This is because immunising this group is unlikely to contribute to population immunity, though it could contribute to the global recovery.

Any future policy work to relax border controls needs to consider the impact on COVID-19 immunisation, for example, considering whether to only allow in people on visitor visas if they have been immunised, or whether they should remain eligible for publicly funded COVID-19 immunisation.

Broad eligibility would support the proposed sequencing approach

Some non-residents, such as some of those on work visas, are likely to be included in the groups identified as a priority in the Sequencing Framework due to their risk of contracting or transmitting the virus.

However, we will need to consider how non-residents are included in the different population cohorts, particularly where there are data gaps and we may not have good information about them.

Implementation

A ministerial direction or contractual changes would be needed

S9(2)(h)



Fiscal implications can likely be absorbed within baseline

Our initial estimate is that the additional cost of expanding eligibility to non-residents would be approximately \$19.8 million. This assumes:

- 100 percent uptake by 320,000 people who would otherwise not be eligible, (which may not take into account Australians who would otherwise not be eligible),
- a cost of S9(2)(i) person, including vaccine consumables and administration, and
- no additional cost of the vaccine itself, given we are likely to have surplus quantities.

Current costings for the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme assume 100 percent uptake for the resident New Zealand population, and factor in a contingency of \$38.5 million. Full uptake is likely to be unrealistic for both the New Zealand resident population and non-residents.

Given the above factors, we consider that it is reasonable to assume that expanding access to non-residents could be absorbed within baseline funding, while visitor numbers remain low. If the success of the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme changes this (i.e. due to very high uptake), we would need to report back to Ministers seeking additional funding.

Communications and engagement

People who are in New Zealand unlawfully may be harder to reach, due to the potential fear that interacting with government by being immunised could lead to them being deported. Further work will be needed to mitigate this risk and encourage uptake, including:

- communications with messaging that no identifying information on visa status would be shared with Immigration NZ; and
- supporting vaccinators, community providers and other outreach services to engage with this group.

Appendix one: Options analysis using the COVID-19 Immunisation Strategy principles

COVID-19 Immunisation Strategy principles	Option one (status quo) – some groups are not eligible for COVID-19 based on residency status	Option two – anyone in New Zealand is eligible for free COVID-19 immunisation
Equity	-1 <i>This option would not lead to equitable treatment for non-residents, however it is consistent with their eligibility to other types of immunisation.</i>	2 <i>This option would treat anyone in New Zealand equitably, regardless of their immigration status.</i>
Equal concern	-2 <i>This option would not treat non-residents as of equal concern.</i>	2 <i>This option would treat non-residents as of equal concern.</i>
Minimise the health, social, economic and cultural harm of COVID-19	-1 <i>This option would not directly protect non-residents from the harm of COVID-19. Given undocumented communities may be more reluctant to engage with officials, this is a concern.</i> <i>However, they may still receive some “flow-on” benefits from others being immunised in their community.</i>	2 <i>This option could protect non-residents who are immunised, which over time could contribute to achieving population immunity and minimising the wider economic impact of COVID-19. It would also reduce the risk of social and cultural harm to non-residents.</i>
Regional responsibility	-1 <i>This option may create a discrepancy, where non-residents can get immunised for free in their home country (funded by NZ), but not if they are living in New Zealand.</i>	1 <i>Some non-residents will be citizens of the participant Pacific countries, for example the majority of RSE workers are from the Pacific.</i>
Value	1 <i>This option would lower the cost of the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme.</i> <i>However, non-residents are already eligible for treatment if they have COVID-19 which could be considerably more expensive (on an individual basis) than immunisation.</i>	-1 <i>This option would increase the cost of the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme, as potentially 320,000 additional people could be eligible.</i> <i>This group may also only be in New Zealand for a short period of time after immunisation, so New Zealand may receive less benefit.</i>
Legitimacy	-1 <i>This option is not evidence-based. It may erode trust if people become concerned that non-residents are likely to transmit COVID-19.</i>	1 <i>This option is evidence-based and may help build confidence that the COVID-19 Immunisation Programme is doing everything to achieve population immunity.</i>
Overall average rating	-0.8	1.2