

Path out of pandemic is no picnic

The road out of the pandemic is to be paved with equal parts impatience and trepidation.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern outlined Cabinet's three-step "road map" plan on Monday afternoon, a strategy aimed at slowly easing Auckland's alert level 3 restrictions. The first stage, in effect from midnight last night, allows up to 10 people from two households to meet up outdoors, and travel can take place anywhere in the Auckland region for exercise or outdoor activities.

No date is set for the next two stages in which more businesses and public facilities open up: "Cabinet will review each step weekly to ensure it's safe to move before confirming the next step."

We have wandered far from the jubilation that greeted past easing of restrictions. The Government would be hard-pressed to find anyone outside its own central ranks with a kind word to say about the step-change.

Business leaders such as Auckland Chamber of Commerce chief executive Michael Barnett want more certainty than the "hopefully, later" the Government has so far provided. "Either set some dates, or the conditions under which we'd move to the second or third phase," he says. "We can't just sit there hoping."

South Island business chiefs were even more aggrieved, remaining at alert level 2 despite being clear of any Covid cases since May last year.

Act leader David Seymour said the staged easing should have a set timeline and the healthcare system and every sector of the economy should be equipped to reduce transmission, hospitalisation and death. National Party leader Judith Collins wants saliva surveillance testing in the community, rapid antigen testing introduced at the Auckland border, and a vaccine target introduced.

On the flipside, public health experts warn any easing on restrictions risks more community transmission and raises the likelihood of spreading the virus around the country. This is echoed by the Te Paati Māori and the Greens, who say it is too risky to ease restrictions while vulnerable communities haven't been vaccinated.

Cabinet has to balance public health advice with all the other ramifications. Slow steps and checking

for balance is the only prudent method.

Time and again, other countries have shown a quick transition into untrammelled movement is a fast-track to surging infections. Our health services assure us we are in no position to tempt this fate.

Frustration is understandable when neighbourhood picnics and hunting trips are approved ahead of small businesses surviving on a thread. The Government has now said it hopes to open schools on October 18. This date would appear to be an ambitious one, but we know what we must do to make it.

Keep practicing precautions – masks, testing when symptomatic, and contact tracing – and encourage everyone to get vaccinated. That's where impatience is best directed right now.

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