

Road map offers little clarity – business groups

Hamish Rutherford

A roadmap showing increasing freedoms for Auckland in coming weeks has disappointed business groups, who say it offers little clarity about when conditions will normalise.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern yesterday outlined a three-step roadmap under which restrictions would be gradually eased, starting from midnight tonight, when Aucklanders will be allowed to meet outside in groups of up to 10, and early childhood education can resume.

Beyond that, the path was unclear. While Ardern signalled that in step two, retail and public spaces such as museums and libraries will reopen, followed by hospitality venues in the third step, she refused to outline a timeline or what it would take for Cabinet to approve the progression.

Brett O'Riley, the Employers and Manufacturers Association (EMA) chief executive, said the rules appeared to be designed, in the absence of business input, by health officials.

"The Government's scrambling to know what to do, and while it's great to know that 10 people can have a picnic, we'd like to know when 10 people who are fully vaccinated can go back to work," O'Riley said.

"This looks like something that's been driven entirely by the Ministry of Health because it shows no insight into business whatsoever. For the businesses that have gone out and had their staff vaccinated, but are still not able to operate fully under alert level 3, what's the process for them?"

O'Riley said the Government had been dropping hints about more support for Auckland businesses for weeks, but as the lockdown dragged on, the mood was darkening.

"What we've seen over the last 72 hours is that businesses are getting increasingly desperate. While it's nice to hear that the wage subsidy and the resurgence payment are extended, we all know that there are many businesses that don't qualify for those.

"We've been hearing for seven weeks that there might be some specific assistance for Auckland businesses, but there's nothing."

Michael Barnett, the chief executive of the Auckland Business Chamber, said there was not much to digest from the announcement.

"It's weak. The only bit of certainty is in the first phase of it. I think what you've got is it's going to leave busi-

nesses desperate for revenue. Many of them burdened with debt and all of them shortchanged on financial support that's being offered.

"They also continue to be burdened with uncertainty."

Last week the chamber, with BusinessNZ and the EMA, called for changes to allow workers that had been both fully vaccinated and with a negative Covid test to move across the border from Auckland.

Ardern yesterday gave no outline on the border beyond that the rules would remain under review.

Barnett said this would have a huge impact on the entire economy.

"The Government has already indicated that if Auckland goes to alert level 2 it isn't their intention to open the border. So Auckland's going to have its own kind of iron curtain and that's going to have a massive impact on the movement of people," Barnett said.

As well as restricting workers coming into the city or moving outside the Auckland limits for their employment, the border would be destructive for New Zealand's tourism industry, he said.

"Aucklanders are about 25 per cent of domestic tourism so that means you're denying the rest of New Zealand the Auckland contribution to tourism."

Yesterday's announcement was focused mainly on outlining the path to potential future freedoms, Ardern hinted more details would be released in the coming days, promising to "set out our plan for the final stages of our vaccination campaign" today.

Then on Thursday there will be an update "on the testing strategy going forward". Cabinet received a report on a "new rigorous testing regime" from the University of Otago's Professor David Murdoch.

Kirk Hope, the chief executive of BusinessNZ, said those updates may provide more information for business than Monday's news.

"While that transitional information is useful, I think the broader strategy that the Prime Minister talked about but said will be coming in the next couple of days about what a move beyond alert levels will look

like will be quite critical," Hope said.

Uncertainty for hospitality industry A16

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