

Reopening plans offer fresh hope

The controversial MIQ system is on its way out for vaccinated travellers, bringing an end to much emotional pain and anguish for Kiwis trapped overseas.

Yesterday's news of a five-step plan to reopen our borders also signals to businesses they can prepare to change gears again, with critical workers on the way to address chronic staff shortages.

It's still no silver bullet and it could be argued the plan doesn't go far enough or fast enough, but it is a balancing act for the Government as we await Omicron's inevitable surge here. It is modelled to peak next month, potentially at tens of thousands of cases a day, and be subsiding by May.

The reopening plan may be late in arriving, but it does at least give renewed hope for struggling businesses, even for those in the tourism industry.

Operators may be miffed that it could take as long as July until international tourists return, but at least the wheels are in motion. Better late than never, as one industry leader put it.

There are genuine concerns, however, about the self-isolation requirement and that it will dissuade tourists from coming here. New Zealand risks falling off the radar for overseas travellers if self-isolation rules remain in place, Tourism Export Council chief executive Lynda Keene says. "If New Zealand is to have any chance of rebuilding its floundering international tourism sector, the Government must remove the self-isolation requirement for visitors as soon as it can. It's a complete handbrake that will keep New Zealand disconnected from the world, not reconnected."

The industry is concerned it will crush any chance of an international tourism recovery.

The Government has reduced the time from 10 days to seven and has indicated that self-isolation times are likely to reduce by the time the country is fully open to international travellers. It must be flexible and willing to take bold steps, as other countries have done to protect their economies.

Already some airlines have stopped flying to New Zealand so it remains crucial for the \$17 billion-a-year industry that the Government addresses this.

The good news is the export sector can plan travel arrangements again, as the Prime Minister herself is doing for trade purposes. Businesses need to be travelling now with the certainty that no matter where they go they can get back. Given the importance of exports to NZ they need that ability

to do business with the world now. Business people stuck overseas are not only costing their companies – they are unproductive for the economy.

Auckland Business Chamber chief executive Michael Barnett said the phased opening of borders does present an opportunity to get back to normal.

Access to critical skills, particularly in health, IT, manufacturing, construction, food production and education, is overdue and most welcome, he said.

The question is to what degree will a measured opening bolster economic activity and address worker shortages? Despite opening to work visas, the pace of uptake is far from certain.