

COVID-19 Alert Levels and public behaviour changes

Paper by a small group of SAGE participants convened and chaired by Ian Diamond on 26 May 2020

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The Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) requested initial advice from a small group of SAGE experts chaired by Ian Diamond to consider the following questions:

- a) To what extent should the Alert Level be directly and publicly coupled with NPIs, as they are in New Zealand?
- b) Who are the key audiences for these alerts? How do their needs differ and how should we address this?
- c) How should changes to the Alert Level be best communicated with the public:
 - i. before a change is made to set public expectations, and
 - ii. as they are changed?
- d) How can public confidence in and compliance with key measures such as handwashing, social distancing and staying at home be strengthened at this stage of the outbreak?
 - i. How can the first review of the alert level be used to help reinforce efforts to protect the health of the public?

The paper concentrates upon Alert Levels 4, 3 and 2 – and movements between these levels - as these are the ones of most significance for public behaviour in the immediate to medium term.

A) Alert Levels and public behaviour

The overriding advice is that alert levels should be clearly linked to NPIs and signpost the required public behaviours needed at each national risk level. Specifically:

- People need to know what to do at a particular alert level and how to prepare for a change in Alert Level
- If it is not clear what to do when an Alert Level increases, it is expected that levels of public anxiety will increase
- A national Alert Level is important for public risk communication. Of equal importance is the information about the situation in a locality, how the Alert Level applies locally and what actions are appropriate in a place, and when moving between places
- Some public behaviours (e.g. hand washing) will be required across all Alert Levels and these messages needs restating
- For clarity of public communications, Alert Levels should be a simple step level system with no sub-division
- More thought is needed about how to join up the national Alert Level with a local risk and alert situation such as a localised outbreak in cases
- People will learn about the national situation but will need to apply this locally; a COVID-19 lead in each workplace and social institution will help bridge the national and local scales

B) Needs and roles of different audiences

Alert Levels will be communicated to the public in general. Of equal, or often more, importance is how the Alert Level and associated public behaviours are restated by trusted leaders in sectors of society, the economy and locally:

- Most people look to trusted groups, local leaders and personal networks such as friends and neighbours to validate official risk communications
- Different sectors and groups trust different people - local voices are seen as 'one of us'
- The national Alert Level system needs to work with such trusted messengers to be effective
- A concerted effort and common messaging by a range of voices is needed to hold the consensus on what the public should do
- Local officials may be more trusted (e.g. local Directors of Public Health) than national communicators, and health workers such as doctors even more so
- Non-state actors with a local profile (religious leaders, people with a trusted role in the local community etc.) are significant for establishing and maintaining public understanding and trust in risk communications and associated advice on behaviours
- Hard to reach people, such as those that do not use the media, will need to be targetted by other mechanisms such as through local networks

C) Communicating changes in Alert Levels

The communication requirements and lead-in times for preparation actions and changing behaviours is different for when Alert Levels increase or decrease:

- In general, going up and down Alert Level system needs to be communicated to the public as expected and a planned public health response to the epidemic as it develops over time
- People need to be aware of this and this will help them prepare e.g. businesses and employees prepared to get back to work
- A lowering of Alert Level will be associated with a scaling down and typically it will be appropriate to provide advance warning of this to enable people to prepare
- An increase in Alert Level is likely to need a faster response and a more immediate call to action to implement additional protective behaviours

It is important to manage uncertainty through enabling preparation and planned behaviour. This requires clear communications and transparency around the Alert Level system and process.

D) Using a review of the Alert Level to increase public confidence in and adherence to public health behaviours

The first review of the current Alert Level, and any subsequent changes in Alert Levels, may provide an opportunity to maintain and build public confidence in taking action and adhering to public health advice on behaviours:

- It is noted that a number of behaviours are required at all Alert Levels
- Equally it is important to provide clarity about what not to do

- People need clear messaging and behavioural advice. This can include how and when to make sensible judgements on protective behaviours as they move between places and risk situations
- Scientists can be trusted messengers though typically they need help to provide simple risk and behavioural advice that summarises the underlying scientific consensus (rather than overstating – in public communication terms – the scientific uncertainties)
- We need to help the public become more able to respond to the current public health challenge and move from the initial and straightforward message and action ('stay at home'); people need to be able to do different behaviours and actions at different times and places – to use their judgement in a way that is consistent with the public health need
- People will require support to understand and adhere to guidance including financial support and positive incentives
- Furthermore people need to learn the steps they should take at each Alert Level and what step they are currently in (both where and when)

It is worth restating that public communications on Alert Levels needs many trusted messengers giving the same advice, many times.

Annex: Request from the Joint Biosecurity Centre

Paper for SAGE small group: COVID-19 ALERT LEVEL and public behaviour changes 25 May 2020

Background

The Joint Biosecurity Centre, which will begin to be operational from 1st June 2020, will be responsible for setting the COVID-19 Alert Level. In advice to the CMO and JBC SRO Tom Hurd on 24 May 2020, the JBC team outlined the intention for the JBC to be the single authoritative advice on the COVID-19 Alert Level from end August 2020, but that in the intervening period the JBC would issue an Alert Level Assessment to the CMOs who would then determine the Alert Level.

In developing the Alert Level, the JBC has sought input from a number of experts, and is separately seeking views on the Alert Level process.

When the JBC was announced as part of the Recovery Strategy on 10th May the Prime Minister outlined the intention for the Alert level to be aligned to the recovery strategy, and Non Pharmaceutical Interventions. As the Alert is operationalised (noting there is now a public expectation for this to be reviewed in the coming week or so) it will be important that we are clear with the public, response organisations and media outlets about what is expected in relation to each Alert Level.

Questions for consideration

The JBC team is seeking expert views on the following questions:

- a) To what extent should the Alert Level be directly and publicly coupled with NPIs, as they are in New Zealand¹?
- b) Who are the key audiences for these alerts? How do their needs differ and how should we address this?
- c) How should changes to the Alert Level be best communicated with the public:
 - i. before a change is made to set public expectations, and
 - ii. as they are changed?
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¹ <https://covid19.govt.nz/assets/resources/tables/COVID-19-alert-levels-detailed.pdf>