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| To | Directors, Presidents, Area Executives and Members |
| From | Dom Kalasih, General Manager Industry |

OMICRON PLANNING UPDATE

Purpose

This Advisory updates operators on discussions we are having with the government and the possibility you may need to register your company details and the number of “critical workers” you have on a yet to be developed Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) online register.

The proposed register is to assist those businesses that may have workers who are close contacts of a positive case but who could return to work early if they are asymptomatic instead of completing self-isolation. Workers who meet the critical threshold will be given access to the Government’s supply of rapid antigen testing.

This Advisory also provides advice on a possible supplier of rapid antigen tests (RATs), now that companies are having difficulty accessing these as the Government has requisitioned much of the previously ordered testing.

Background

Last Thursday, around midday, the Ministry of Transport (MoT) requested Transporting New Zealand provide information, within 24 hours, on a spreadsheet of operator names and their respective NZ Business Number and the number of “critical” workers. This data would be used to sense check a MBIE critical worker register being proposed for when the Government escalated its Covid-19 response to the newly declared Phase 2 or Phase 3.

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We had met with Transport Minister Michael Wood the day before and he had indicated this register was coming. Officials from Ministry of Transport and Waka Kotahi NZ Transport Agency were in that meeting and the Minister said both agencies would be able to help as we do everything we can to keep the supply chain running efficiently through the expected Omicron outbreak.

We have a number of concerns about the approach MBIE is taking which we continue to discuss with them. We note the terminology has changed from “essential” to “critical”. Our view, as we have expressed, is the supply chain is an essential service and cannot be split into arbitrary categories. We believe the industry as a whole should remain “essential” and that it is a waste of everyone’s valuable time to register individual workers, which will number in the tens of thousands.

However, we wish to inform you now so you can be prepared in the event the Government insists that operators wishing to exercise an option that allows workers that are close contacts to return to work, if they are asymptomatic, instead of self-isolate will have to register on the MBIE website.

What you need to know

If you will need the option of having your workers that are close contacts of positive cases return to work early, if they are asymptomatic, instead of completing self-isolation then be prepared that you may need to register each employee’s details with MBIE.

If you are trying to purchase RATs this supplier may be an option to consider <https://www.waimarienz.co.nz/rat> They have advised us they have some capacity.

We are working with others in the private sector to ensure a way of supplying RATs, other than waiting for the Government to hand them out. We are aware that many businesses are required to do regular testing and that there is a lot of anxiety about the unavailability of tests for the private market.

Managing workers in Phase 2 and Phase 3

The information below is a summary of the information on the MBIE website:

If New Zealand reaches Phase 2 of the Omicron outbreak, a test-to-return approach using Rapid Antigen Tests will become an option for **'registered'** workers that are critically needed to maintain infrastructure and supply chains. Phase 2 is when *“Cases have spread in the community so we need to minimise and slow further spread and assist our vulnerable communities.”* [Omicron in the community: what this means for you | Ministry of Health NZ](#)

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Phase 2 testing requirements will be:

- Rapid Antigen Tests (RAT) may be used in addition to PCR testing for symptomatic people and close contacts
- 'Test to return' if needed for asymptomatic healthcare and critical workforce who are close contacts using RATs
- PCR testing to confirm diagnosis if positive RAT.

Transport is deemed to be critical however operators may have workers that are not critical to their operation and therefore, MBIE want each business to declare/register how many of their employees are critical.

If you have not been contacted by MBIE you will need to register your workers through an online portal that will be launched on www.business.govt.nz in February. This portal will walk you through the process of identifying if you are a critical business, and if so, which of your workers are classified as critical, then allow you to register critical worker numbers in the Critical Services Register.

The intent of the MBIE registration process is so the RAT can be distributed.

What will 'test-to-return' look like? [Testing and returning to work during Omicron — business.govt.nz](http://www.business.govt.nz)

Ideally critical workers who are close contacts of positive cases should self-isolate wherever possible. However, the 'test-to-return' option allows a business to choose to have a critical worker close contact return to work early, provided they return a negative Rapid Antigen Test every day that they are at work throughout their required isolation period, or as otherwise appropriate to their work setting. They will only be allowed to go to work – not anywhere else. Operators should also ensure that business continuity plans are in place for if a critical worker tests positive and needs to isolate.

Rapid Antigen Tests are less sensitive at detecting cases than a PCR test, so it is possible that your worker may have and be able to spread COVID-19, even if they return a negative Rapid Antigen Test.

If a critical business does determine that test-to-return is needed for a critical worker, the business should ensure, as far as reasonably practicable, that safety protocols are maintained. These protocols will help to mitigate the risks associated with Rapid Antigen Testing:

- Daily symptom checks, and a daily negative Rapid Antigen Test result, required prior to the worker commencing work for the day
- Strict use of a medical mask, donned by the worker before entry to the workplace and changed as needed during the day

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- Strict compliance with any infection prevention and control protocols at work
- When the worker's mask is removed (e.g. for eating and drinking) physical distancing must be maintained – the worker should eat alone in a well-ventilated space where possible
- The worker should travel alone to and from and around work or between jobs, where possible
- Ensure good ventilation when in small spaces and masks must be worn by everyone present
- If symptoms develop at any stage, the worker will follow the public advice for close contacts with symptoms.

Workers under a test-to-return scheme should still isolate when they are not at work, until their isolation period ends. This means that they will only be able to go to work and go home, and will not be able to do things like meet with co-workers socially outside of work, visit a café or restaurant, or go shopping.

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