



Education Report – Covid-19 | continuing our distance learning response

To:	Hon Grant Robertson, Minister of Finance Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education		
Date:	27 August 2021	Priority:	High
Security Level:	In Confidence	METIS No:	1269668
Drafter:	Alex White	DDI:	9(2)(a)
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Messaging seen by Communications team:	No	Round Robin:	No

Purpose of Report

This report follows decisions from the Covid-19 Ministerial Group to authorise you to jointly approve draw-down from a newly established tagged contingency fund to provide further distance learning support to schools, kura and early learning services for both immediate and ongoing Covid-19 related disruption [CMG-21-MIN-0006 refers].

Specifically, this report seeks your approval to draw-down \$6 million to fund:

- production of a further four weeks of education television content (live and on-demand); and
- 7,000 internet connections for learner households who do not have access to the internet.

Summary

- On 24 August, the Covid-19 Ministerial Group agreed to the purchase of further distance learning supports (television content and internet connections) and established a tagged contingency fund of \$6 million to fund this work [CMG-21-MIN-0006 refers]. They authorised the Minister of Finance and Minister of Education jointly to approve draw-down of funding.
- While little time has elapsed since the establishment of the tagged contingency, following Government announcements about extending Alert Level 4 the Ministry have now reactivated distance learning support channels, including live educational broadcasting. This presents a risk of exhausting available supply of new television content.
- Accordingly, it is recommended that you jointly agree the draw-down of \$6 million so that work can commence immediately on further distance learning supports to ensure

we are well prepared for ongoing and possible future disruptions. Specifically, the production of additional broadcasting content and connecting new households to the internet.

Proactively Released

Recommended Actions

The Ministry of Education recommends you:

- a. **Note** that the Covid-19 Ministerial Group agreed to the purchase of further distance learning supports (television content and internet connections), and established a tagged contingency fund of \$6 million to fund this work, authorising the Minister of Finance and Minister of Education jointly to approve draw-down of funding [CMG-21-MIN-0006 refers];

	\$m – increase/(decrease)				
	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26& Outyears
Ongoing Distance Learning Support – Tagged Operating Contingency	6.000	-	-	-	-

Noted

Noted

- b. **Note** that, following Government announcements about extending Alert Level 4 and ongoing uncertainty about possible extensions to this timeframe, it is our recommendation that work commence immediately on producing new TV content and arranging further internet connections, noting both require lead time;

Noted

Noted

Live and on-demand content

- c. **Note** that the Ministry has re-activated live television broadcasting on TVNZ and Māori TV as of 25 August;

Noted

Noted

- d. **Note** that the provision of new live and on-demand television services will consume part, or all, of the limited new content available, and this will need to be replaced with additional content in order to be prepared for possible disruption to in person teaching and learning;

Noted

Noted

- e. **Note** that there is lead-time involved in the production of new learning content suitable for broadcast, and that it is our recommendation that this work begin immediately;

Noted

Noted

- f. **Agree** to the production of new learning content suitable for broadcast, that the Ministry initiate provision for additional content at a total cost of no more than \$4.0 million, to provide a good blend of new and repeat content for an additional four weeks;

Agree/Disagree

Agree/Disagree

Internet connections

- g. **Note** that, since March 2021, the Ministry has been working to proactively provide internet connectivity to learners in schools and kura across Auckland, and has recently expanded this offering to Northland, Waikato and Bay of Plenty; this work is ongoing and the Ministry will prioritise wharekura and households with students receiving devices [METIS 1252165 refers];

Noted

Noted

- h. **Note** that existing funding for the proactive connectivity campaign is unlikely to fully meet demand across the country and that the Ministry estimates that there are around 7,000 new connections that need to be made across Aotearoa New Zealand;

Noted

Noted

- i. **Note** that the Ministry only pays for connections that are successfully made and has not incurred costs where connections have been rejected or modems returned;

Noted

Noted

- j. **Agree** the Ministry negotiate for up to 7,000 new internet connections, at a total cost of no more than 9(2)(i) million;

Agree/Disagree

Agree/Disagree

Financial recommendations

- k. **Approve** the following changes to appropriations to give effect to the policy decisions in recommendations (f) and (j) above;

	\$m – increase/(decrease)				
Vote Education Minister of Education	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26& Outyears
Multi-Category Expenses and Capital Expenditure:					
Improved Quality Teaching and Learning MCA					
Non-departmental Output Expense:					
Curriculum Support	6.000	-	-	-	-

Approve/Not Approve

Approve/Not Approve

- l. **Agree** that the proposed change to appropriations for 2021/22 above be included in the 2021/22 Supplementary Estimates and that, in the interim, the increase be met from Imprest Supply;

Agree/Disagree

Agree/Disagree

- m. **Agree** that the expenses incurred under recommendation (k) above be charged against the 'Operating Contingency - Ongoing Distance Learning Support' tagged contingency previously established by Cabinet [CAB-21-MIN-0329 refers], and note the contingency will be exhausted;

Agree/Disagree

Agree/Disagree

- n. **Agree** that this report should not be proactively released at this time due to commercial sensitivity.

Agree/Disagree

Agree/Disagree



Hon Grant Robertson
Minister of Finance

31/8/2021



Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education

28/8/2021



Ellen MacGregor-Reid
Deputy Secretary
Early Learning and Student Achievement

27/08/2021

Background

1. Under existing Alert Level 4 Cabinet and the Covid-19 Ministerial Group have made a series of decisions relating to distance learning support for schools, kura and services for both immediate and ongoing Covid-19 related disruption. These decisions have included:
 - funding of \$4.020 million to purchase available fit-for-education devices up to a total of 7,000 devices;
 - funding of \$600,000 to print and distribute learning packs for learners engaging in NCEA;
 - the establishment of a \$5 million funding pool to cover additional costs related to sourcing and distribution of distance learning materials and devices;
[CAB-21-MIN-0329 refers]
 - further funding of \$22 million to print learning packs for early learning, Years 1-10 and additional packs for NCEA (in both English and Māori-medium).
[CMG-21-MIN-0006 refers]
2. The Covid-19 Ministerial Group also agreed to the purchase of new content to support four weeks of additional broadcasting content and 7,000 additional internet connections, if these were needed.
3. They agreed to establish a tagged contingency fund of \$6 million to fund this work and authorised the Minister of Finance and Minister of Education jointly to approve draw-down of funding.
4. Your joint approval is sought to the immediate draw-down of funding from the tagged contingency to allow the Ministry to get underway with work on new broadcasting content and internet connections so that we can remain prepared to respond swiftly to ongoing Covid-19 related changeability.

Draw-down of tagged contingency

5. Following the Government's decision to extend nation-wide Alert Level 4 the Ministry has activated the full range of distance learning responses. This has included:
 - Reactivation of live education television broadcasts (TVNZ and Māori TV);
 - distribution of learning packs to schools and kura in priority areas;
 - design and production of new learning packs; and
 - distribution of fit-for-education devices to schools and kura in priority areas.

Live and on-demand content

6. The Ministry has sufficient existing material - comprising previously aired and new content - to cover a broadcasting period of six weeks, if needed. However, once broadcasting begins, the percentage of new content drops with every two-week period. For example, the first two weeks of TVNZ, 40% of all of the content aired is new but this drops to 30% for the next two weeks, and 20% for the final two weeks etc.¹ While children are often fine watching repeat material it is important that our broadcasting content comprise enough new material to keep learners engaged.
7. Through its procurement planning, the Ministry is currently finalising the number of hours of content required, however, our current estimates are set out below:
 - For Māori TV, we intend to purchase between 30-35 hours of new content – this equates to two weeks of new content. When deployed alongside existing content², this will provide a further possible broadcasting period of six weeks (approximately 35% of total content would be new for this period).
 - For TVNZ, we intend to purchase a further 80 hours of new content – this equates to four weeks of new content. Again, when deployed alongside existing content this would provide a further eight weeks of programming (50% new content for an eight-week period). Note that this number of hours required is greater for TVNZ than for Māori TV as we have fewer hours of content currently available to us in an English-medium context as contingency.
8. While there is some uncertainty around the period of raised alert levels, there is a risk that we may exhaust available supply of new broadcasting content. Television is one of our key educational outreach mechanisms during “lockdowns”, particularly for younger children and where households lack connectivity.
9. Due to the lead-time required to produce new content, it is recommended that joint approval be given to immediately to draw-down funding of \$4 million to get this work underway. Production of further broadcasting content will mean we remain prepared to respond to both immediate and ongoing changeability.

Internet connections

10. Our distance learning work since March 2020 has also included the allocation of over 65,000 learner addresses to internet service providers for connection. This has resulted in the provisioning of 40,000 new internet connections for eligible learner households across the country, for the period ending December 2021 (noting that, of these, a number remain in-progress) [METIS 1266046 most recently refers].
11. The Ministry only pays for connections that are successfully made and has not incurred costs where connections have been rejected or modems returned. This is because the Ministry contracts with service providers on the basis of ‘internet service subscription’. For most households, this means the Ministry only incurs costs when successful connections are made - a process which includes both delivery of a modem (or other hardware) and a usable service being available to the household.

¹ For Māori TV, a greater number of hours of new content are currently available, meaning the percentage of new content – while will reducing incrementally over time – are higher.

² For the purposes of broadcasting any new content funded from the tagged contingency (i.e. in the future), ‘existing content’ will comprise content currently being broadcast for the first time under current Alert Level 4. Using content in this way will help to minimise repetition.

12. Access to the internet is a critical enabler for accessing a range of services, including teaching and learning channels, resources and platforms. Providing learner households with access to the internet increases the system's resilience to provide meaningful learning opportunities as well as reduce the burden on the centre to continue providing hardcopy resources (learning packs) – in the event of extended or possible future Covid-19 disruption.
13. Accordingly, since March 2021, the Ministry has been working to proactively provide internet connectivity to learners in secondary schools and kura across Auckland, and has recently expanded this offering to Northland, Waikato and Bay of Plenty. This work is ongoing (prioritising wharekura and households with students receiving devices) [METIS 1252165 refers].
14. As previously reported, existing funding for the proactive connectivity campaign is unlikely to fully meet demand across the country and the Ministry estimates that there are around 7,000 new connections that need to be made across Aotearoa New Zealand.
15. Due to significant lead and lag times for arranging new connections,³ and to maximise the available window in which subsidised internet is available (until end of calendar year), it is recommended that joint approval also be given to immediately draw-down funding of 9(2)(j) million to begin connection any/all learner households nation-wide (prioritising households in regions most affected by Covid-19 as well as households also receiving fit-for-education devices (who do not already have internet connectivity)).
16. Note that a range of costs have been provided to connect the remaining 7,000 households 9(2)(j) because we are required to negotiate and contract with a variety of service providers whose prices vary. We have a high-level of confidence about this cost estimate due to the work completed to-date on the proactive connectivity campaign, as well as work under Alert Level 4 in 2020.
17. While the Ministry is currently only able to provide subsidised internet connectivity until 31 December 2021, covering up-front costs of connecting households (especially more rural households) can help to remove barriers to the household choosing to continue with a private internet arrangement (i.e. large up-front costs can prove a significant obstacle when choosing to take on a private arrangement). It also helps establish important foundational infrastructure (physical copper or fibre etc.) which can make it easier for households to reconnect to the internet at a later date.

Risks

18. There is risk associated with taking no further action to support schools, kura and early learning services with distance learning through ongoing Covid-19 related disruption. While many schools and kura are feeling confident about their ability to continue teaching and learning remotely, a number will require further distance learning support from the Ministry, and it is important to respond as we can to these needs and to be prepared for possible further Alert Level changes in the future.

³ We expect timeframes from initial allocation through to connection to be approximately six weeks. This timeframe is, however, affected by access to accurate, up-to-date learner address information as well as the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on service providers.

19. The countervailing risk of wastage is minimal (i.e., if Government decisions are to shortly ease Alert Levels for most or all regions), preparing additional broadcasting content and connecting additional learner households to the internet will help the sector and Ministry stay prepared for any possible future Covid-19 related disruption.

Report-back

20. We will report-back to the Minister of Education on progress of delivery through regular channels.

Treasury consultation

21. This paper has been shared with The Treasury in advance.

Proactive Release

22. It is not intended that this Education Report be proactively released at this time due to commercial sensitivity, as per Official Information Act 1982, s 9 (2)(g)(i).