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CALL FOR ISOLATION OVERHAUL PILES PRESSURE ON STATES

PM's plea: set the people free

JOE KELLY
CANNBERRA BUREAU CHIEF

Tens of thousands of Australians would be freed from isolation under a major reset of pandemic rules to be considered by an emergency meeting of national cabinet on Thursday, where Scott Morrison will ask state and territory leaders to relax the definition of a Covid-19 close contact.

The Prime Minister said the nation was "going through a gear change" and a new approach was needed to ensure escalating Omicron infections did not result in "everybody just being taken out of circulation" and state health systems being crashed unnecessarily because of outmoded testing requirements.

Under the proposed shake-up, a close contact would be limited to those exposed to the virus within a household-like setting for more than four hours. The proposed redefinition would transfer the risk of individuals becoming close contacts from the workplace to family residences in a move hailed by business groups.

"We're talking about someone that they're living with. We're talking about someone like me and my family here (at Kirribilli House) who are living here together," Mr Morrison said. "If one of my kids - Abbey or Lily - got it, or if of course Jenny got it or any of the household staff here got it, then we would find ourselves in that situation and I would be a close contact."

"If I went down to a restaurant down the road and I happened to pop in and get some takeaway and there was a case there, I would not be a close contact."
Close contacts would face a shortened week-long quarantine and be required take a rapid antigen test on day six as well as a second test on day 12.

Both NSW Premier Dominic Perrotet and WA Premier Mark McGowan backed Mr Morrison's push for an updated nationally consistent definition of a close contact.

"We are looking forward to a discussion in relation to changes to be made in relation to close contact definitions," Mr Perrotet said. "I certainly believe it would be best if we had a national approach."

Mr McGowan said in Perth that a revision of close contact was "wise" and would protect critical sectors of the economy.

"What you don't want to do is have lots of people just leaving the workforce because they are in touch with someone who is positive... So you imagine in a power station

Fewer Omicron patients needing intensive care

Intensive care admissions from the Omicron variant have been minuscule, with only 0.1 per cent of active cases in NSW and 0.3 per cent of active cases in Victoria needing urgent treatment.

Scott Morrison said on Wednesday that 126 Covid-positive people were in intensive care units and 55 needed ventilators out of more than 93,000 active cases.

As of Wednesday, only 61 of NSW's active 61,332 Covid-19 cases were in intensive care and 62 of Victoria's 19,994 active cases were in ICU.

There were 18,243 new cases of Covid-19 announced nationally on Wednesday.

Chief medical officer Paul Kelly said the low hospitalisation rate was due to a world-leading vaccination rate and the fact Omicron did not appear to lead to as serious illness as previous Covid-19 variants.

"In terms of the severity... we know now that it is very likely this is less severe than other forms of the virus," Professor Kelly said.

"How much less severe is still an open question. I've seen estimates from 15 per cent less severe to 80 per cent less severe."

But he warned the ICU wards were still dominated by the unvaccinated. "Boosters are important, but can I please - as I say at almost every press conference - implore anyone who has not yet had their

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Surest medical director Peter Lewis and registered nurse On Hongsopha in Melbourne on Wednesday with rapid antigen tests

IAN CURRIE

INSIDE

Morrison has seized on the challenge of Omicron as an opportunity to overhaul the pandemic rule book and liberalise restrictions.

JOE KELLY P5



someone turns up to work who is positive and then everyone goes off work," Mr McGowan told Perth FM radio.

"The power station shuts down, or a hospital or an aged care facility. You can't have that happen. So the new definitions, the tighter

definition of close contacts is a good thing to do."

Under the proposed reset of pandemic rules, Mr Morrison said the bulk of Australians would be shifted from PCR tests to rapid tests, with chief medical officer Paul Kelly arguing the queues at testing centres were "not fulfilling any useful public health function".

Queensland on Wednesday announced it would accept rapid antigen tests for border entries from January 1, in a move likely to alleviate pressure on the NSW and Victorian health systems.

PCR tests would be prioritised for individuals displaying symptoms and high-priority groups

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Floodgates thrown open for rapid tests

DAMON JOHNSTON
JOSEPH LAM

The nation will be flooded with tens of millions of free rapid antigen tests within a week, with the Morrison and Andrews governments launching programs to distribute the DIY kits.

The move will relieve pressure on the state-based PCR testing sites, make it easier and quicker for close contacts of positive cases to obtain the 15-minute tests and save Australians from being stung between \$15 and \$20 per kit.

Demand for rapid tests has been outstripping supply, leading to sell-

outs at supermarkets and pharmacies in the past week as infection numbers soar and governments move to endorse the tests.

Victoria on Wednesday announced it had bought 34 million rapid tests. Within hours the federal government said it had approved \$375m to secure 50 million more, on top of 10 million it had already procured.

As cases soar and Australians rush to buy tests, Scott Morrison is coming under increasing attack from Labor and the states for the current shortages and was accused of leaving a testing policy vacuum.

The Prime Minister said the

states were responsible for securing their own rapid tests but the federal government was spending an extra \$375m to secure a further 50 million for the national medical stockpile, which is used as an emergency reserve and to meet federal responsibilities, including in aged-care centres.

So far, 1.6 million tests have been supplied to aged-care homes in NSW and 1.2 million in Victoria. One million tests remained in the national stockpile, with three million having already been used. Mr Morrison said a further six million were "arriving very soon".

Welcoming the announcements from NSW and Victoria

that they would secure their own supplies of rapid tests, Mr Morrison said: "That's their job, and I'm glad they're doing it."

Amid fears about supply, Melbourne company Surest said it had about 70,000 tests on hand, the majority of which were in a Sydney warehouse.

Company medical director Peter Lewis said he could access 14 times its current stock load each week should demand rise.

"We certainly have the ability to pivot very quickly. We've got factories overseas that we can get access to very large quantities of tests," he said. "We can bring in

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Nuclear waste arrival sparks storage debate

EXCLUSIVE

JACQUELIN MAGNAY

Australia is to receive a two-tonne shipment of nuclear waste from Britain that will arrive under tight security and amid high secrecy in the coming months.

The shipment of intermediate-level nuclear waste has been prepared for delivery to the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation facilities at Lucas Heights, in Sydney's south.

It will be just the second tranche of intermediate-level nuclear

waste returned to the country, and its arrival shines a spotlight on Australia's lack of a long-term storage plan for nuclear waste classified above low-level material. The radioactive uranium and plutonium waste has been vitrified in four glass containers and then encased in an outer container made of specialised steel, known as a TN81 cask.

ANSTO says its previous experience in receiving intermediate-level nuclear waste - which occurred in 2015 when a larger shipment was returned from France - will mitigate any risks.

In that shipment, all local roads

along the route were shut for more than five hours, and the operation involved the NSW Riot Squad and other police units to contain anti-nuclear protesters.

In the coming weeks, the nuclear waste will be moved by rail from the decommissioned nuclear plant at Sellafield in Cumbria to the British coast before being loaded onto a ship operated by Nuclear Transport Solutions.

It is expected to travel through Australian waters, including some maritime parks, before berthing.

The cargo is likely to be unloaded at Port Kembla in Wollongong under heavy guard, arriving

sometime before the middle of next year.

Wherever the ship berths, the container will be loaded onto a truck for transport through residential and industrial areas, as well as along the Princes Highway through the Royal National Park south of Sydney and on to the Lucas Heights facility.

ANSTO says the final route will be a closely guarded secret and will be decided in consultation with NSW authorities.

NTS confirmed that the return of the intermediate-level waste in the form of vitrified residue to

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IBAC's evidence bungle

EXCLUSIVE

DAMON JOHNSTON

Victoria's anti-corruption authority was forced to apologise after "indiscreet" and "inappropriate" actions by an agent resulted in seized items in a clear evidence bag returned to a person of interest at their workplace.

The Independent Broad-based Anti-corruption Commission apologised to the person, referred to only as X, over the incident that triggered changes to policies and procedures at the authority.

The bungle has been revealed by the Victorian Inspectorate - the body that monitors IBAC - as it confirmed it investigated 44 complaints against the authority in 2020-21. The inspectorate said it had investigated the complaint from X "about the indiscreet manner in which an IBAC technical officer returned property seized during an investigation".

It said the officer's "inappropriate actions" displayed a "lack of situational awareness" and indicated the "chain of custody process to be followed for seized property" was breached.

FULL REPORT P3

Adani at full tilt 'within months'

India's Adani Group says its Carmichael coalmine is expected to reach full production within months, as anti-coal groups vow to keep up the fight to disrupt its operations.

Bravus Mining and Resources (the trading name of Adani Mining) said the first shipment from Carmichael was at the company's port facilities in Bowen, ready for loading.

"This is a big moment for everyone who has worked so diligently and passionately to build this mine," Bravus chief executive David Boshoff said.

FULL REPORT P4

Top cop's fight to end grog mayhem

EXCLUSIVE

PAIGE TAYLOR
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS
CORRESPONDENT

Secret police dossiers on alcohol-fuelled violence, crime and its effects on children across Australia's northwest reveal Western Australia's police commissioner has gone to extraordinary lengths to try to introduce take-away alcohol restrictions.

Commissioner Chris Dawson's proposed restrictions include closing bottle shops in the Kimberley and placing strict limits on what licensees can sell in some of the Pilbara's biggest towns.

His push for a ban on the sale of full-strength take-away alcohol in WA's far north Kimberley is confronting crime data and testimony from police, hospital workers and elders. However, his intervention defies the McGowan government's preference for a banned drinkers register that would allow Kimberley bottle shops to keep trading in full-strength beer, wine and spirits.

Many licensees are quietly relieved the WA director of liquor licensing has delayed a decision on Mr Dawson's requests until at least July 2022. They believe trials under way of a banned drinkers register in WA's Kimberley, Pilbara and Goldfields regions should be completed and assessed before Mr Dawson's proposals for blanket alcohol restrictions are explored. However, the commissioner, whose pandemic powers have given him authority that rivals WA Premier Mark McGowan, is not resiling from almost three years of efforts to bring in uniform limits on the sale of take-away alcohol across the state's north.

He describes the Kimberley as a community in crisis. He links "pervasive" alcohol abuse to family violence, child neglect and abuse, and says uniform, non-negotiable liquor restrictions are required to aid the recovery of vulnerable people.

His May 2019 report on the effects of excessive alcohol consumption in the Kimberley, obtained by The Australian, details how alcohol-related violence and crime increased steeply during a five-year policy void.

Six months later, in November 2019, Mr Dawson lodged a similar report on alcohol-related crime in the region that lies immediately south of the Kimberley - the Pilbara.

That report includes a written submission from the women's shelter in the Pilbara town of Newman, which says chronic drinking is the most common cause of death for local Martu people who are clients or related to clients. Between 2006 and 2020, the shelter recorded 112 deaths, and 54 of those were from chronic drinking.

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EDITORIAL P8



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Makeshift morgues sent to low-vax islands

LYDIA LYNCH

Temporary morgues are being shipped to remote Queensland islands as Covid-19 begins to spread into some of the state's most isolated communities for the first time.

At least two Covid-19 cases were detected on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait on Wednesday and another in Cherbourg, a three-hour drive northwest of Brisbane. Vaccination rates in both com-

munities trail behind state and national averages, with 24 per cent of people older than 16 on Thursday Island yet to receive two doses.

The most recent vaccination figures for Cherbourg, released by the federal government on December 22, revealed its first-jab rate was at 68.8 per cent, with only 57.9 per cent double-dosed.

A temporary morgue was sent to the undervaccinated community of Palm Island, a 20-minute flight from Townsville, on Wednesday. Sharing a photo of a ship-

ping container on social media, Mayor Mislam Sam said he was told there could be 60 deaths on Palm Island and the temporary morgue was "the starkest reminder yet that locals are at serious risk of illness and death from Covid".

"We have very ill people in our community and low vaccination rates," he said. "While health authorities must plan for the worst, we can do more to make sure no one needs to use this morgue. The only way is to get vaccinated today."

Torres Shire Mayor Vonda Malone said the Thursday Island community was shocked by the positive cases, only a fortnight after the state border opened.

"We were counting the days, knowing the rest of Queensland was highly affected by Covid since the border opened but it came a lot quicker than we thought," she said.

Ms Malone said there had been a lot of scepticism around vaccines but health workers managed to lift job rates across the region with intensive community engagement.

"It has been improving rapidly, but there is still more we need to do," she said.

In Cherbourg, Eric Law, a retired teacher and former mayor of the 1500-strong Aboriginal community, said a lot of people stayed at home for Christmas as they were worried about travelling.

"There is a fair bit of anxiety around, a lot of people are hoping it won't come here, but that is out of our hands," he said.

The remote community was among the worst hit during the

1919 Spanish flu pandemic, with almost one in six people dying.

Jason Agostino, epidemiological adviser to the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, said he was worried for communities with lagging vaccination coverage. "We know what will happen if vaccination rates do not lift because it happened in western NSW," he said.

"Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be infected at about twice the rate of non-Indigenous people and hospitalisation

and ICU admissions are higher in every age group. The community will be hit hard unless there are really strong public health responses like we saw in the Northern Territory when alternative accommodation was made available to help slow the spread."

Despite the growing spread of Covid in Queensland, Indigenous vaccination rates continue to lag behind the rest of the state, which community leaders and epidemiologists partly attribute to misinformation rife on social media.

Indigenous Leaders Forum chair Wayne Butcher, Mayor of the 800-strong Cape York community of Lockhart River, said vaccination rates were higher in his community than others because health workers went door to door to answer questions in the privacy of people's homes and dispense jabs early on in the rollout.

He said the next challenge would be to convince parents to get their children immunised, with the rollout of Pfizer to 5-11-year-olds starting on January 10.

PM seizes moment to change direction

JOE KELLY
COMMENT

This is Scott Morrison's great pandemic pivot.

Australians have endured almost two years of strict Covid rules, destructive lockdowns, gruelling 14-day quarantine requirements and the constant fear of daily life being put on hold because of a "close contact" with the virus.

But Omicron is a game-changer. While the variant presents a serious new challenge for Morrison, he has seized on it as an opportunity to overhaul the pandemic rule book, liberalise restrictions and build public confidence towards living with the virus.

It is a transformation that Australia must inevitably make.

But just months out from an election, Morrison has gambled that there is a major political advantage in moving quickly to return life closer to normal for Australians. He proposes to do this by changing the definition of what constitutes a close contact.

Under his plan, close contacts would need to be exposed to the virus for more than four hours in household-like settings.

This would free tens of thousands of Australians from isolation. It would also ensure that tens of thousands more are not required to isolate as the

virus becomes more widely spread in the community.

Business hailed the proposal as essential, arguing it would free up more staff. For smaller businesses it may prove the difference that allows them to survive.

While representing a major evolution in Australia's approach to the pandemic, there are political risks with Morrison's reset of the Covid rules.

Firstly, he is banking that Australia's high vaccination rates will protect the community and allow for a greater public acceptance of spiralling case numbers in coming days, weeks and months.

A miscalculation on this front will prove costly.

Secondly, it will require the nation to make the psychological leap from focusing on infections to more relevant statistics, including hospital and ICU admissions. A sharp increase in deaths will dent confidence in Morrison's strategy.

Finally, while Morrison has proposed the new rules he is not in charge of implementing them.

One of the familiar themes of the pandemic is that the federal government has been held hostage by the states.

Disagreement among the states on Morrison's strategy would see the emergence of even more differences across the nation in terms of Covid regulations.

Morrison acknowledged this as a possibility on Wednesday, noting that "in states where there are very low numbers of cases, the need to change things at this stage is not as great as they are here in NSW".

Morrison in plea to states: set people free

Continued from Page 1

including international arrivals, healthcare workers, the elderly, the immunocompromised, those with comorbidities and Indigenous Australians.

"With Omicron, you adjust, you adapt," Mr Morrison said. "What this will do is alleviate those queues that people are in and make sure the people who need to be there can be there and get those tests and people who don't need to be there can be at home or somewhere else."

Under Mr Morrison's plan, free rapid tests would be evenly funded by the state and federal governments and be provided at existing testing centres – but only to close contacts and those displaying symptoms. Asymptomatic people would need to buy the tests at pharmacies or supermarkets.

Australian Hotels Association chief executive Stephen Ferguson said the overhaul would help keep hospitality businesses afloat, and he urged all state and territory leaders to support the plan.

"Hospitality venues are losing staff by the day because of contacts at work or other places," he said. "Basically at the moment with the way that close contacts are being interpreted, it's a lockdown by another means."

Australian Retailers Association chief executive Paul Zahra said there had been "instances where some small retailers had not been able to open for trade as a result of the current isolation requirements". "We need a commonsense approach to isolation requirements that doesn't decimate businesses. We look forward to a more sensible approach being agreed by national cabinet," he said.

Australian Industry Group chief executive Innes Willox said Mr Morrison's proposal "makes a lot of sense" and that there should have been a "workable and sensible national standard for close contacts weeks ago".

Drop in intensive care treatment

Continued from Page 1

primary doses of vaccine to reconsider that decision," he said.

"Here in NSW, two-thirds of people in ICU are unvaccinated. They are, that is still the very highest risk."

The minuscule rates of hospitalisation emerged as a new study revealed Omicron could help people mount an immune response against Delta.

The study by Africa Health Research Institute professor Alex Sigal showed the 15 participants developed an "enhanced immunity" against Delta if they had contracted Omicron.

"The increase in Delta variant neutralisation in individuals infected with Omicron may result in decreased ability of Delta to reinfect those individuals," he said.

ANGELICA SNOWDEN

"Instead business has had to navigate the changing demands of overly cautious state health officials who have shown no care for the economic impact of their edicts," Mr Willox said.

"The Prime Minister's proposal has the potential to keep many businesses open and tens of thousands of people at work while balancing reasonable risks around transmission. This is both welcome and timely and needs to be supported as a matter of urgency."

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Andrew McKellar said the liberalisation of the definition of a close contact was a "step in the right direction" and the onus was on all states and territories to come to the table.

NYE a damp squib for cruise captains



JOHN FEDER

Australian Cruise Group Captain Mujdat Aktepe at Kings St Wharf, Darling Harbour, is expecting a low turnout for Sydney's New Year's Eve

RHIANNON DOWN
JOSEPH LAM

Soaring Covid-19 cases are threatening to blight another New Year's Eve for tourism operators in Sydney as revellers cancel their harbour cruises in droves.

What is normally the busiest night on Sydney Harbour – when thousands of locals and tourists flock to tick off a bucket-list item and experience the famous fireworks from the water – is threatening to be one of the worst years on record.

At this stage the NSW government is still committed to the traditional fireworks spectacular with more than six tonnes of fireworks set up and ready to be ignited on Friday night.

Australian Cruise Group executive director Sudhir Warriar said growing Covid-19 cases in NSW – which reached record 11,201 on Wednesday – had led to bookings drying up in what is normally the busiest week of the year.

"It is very devastating because we were doing so well until early December, and the confidence just fell off in the past 10 days," Mr Warriar said.

"It's the fear to book, that is the biggest factor – the fear to book and what happens if it gets cancelled ... there have been so many decisions in quick succession and they worry there may not be fireworks, or a new decision."

"This is another blow we don't need. Our business is the most impacted as it is dependent on inbound tourism."

Mr Warriar said the company usually sold about 2500 tickets for New Year's Eve across 12 boats, but this year just 600 tickets had been bought.

"Financially it has been very challenging, not just for us but for the entire industry," he said.

"We had JobKeeper and JobSaver – it was all helpful but our business is a high-capital business and the cost of repairs and moorings, the fixed costs, don't change."

"We had hoped this was the turning point."

Great Gatsby Boat Party owner Ben Webster said that his company's New Year's Eve cruise, which has capacity for 400 people, would be running at half capacity this year.

"It has been a rollercoaster," he said.

"A lot of people are either cancelling or some people want to go but are confused about the messaging from the government," he said.

"People aren't booking, we've spent a lot of money on advertising, and so basically on a night like New Year's Eve, when it's our prime night of the year, we'll be lucky to break even."

Assuming they do go ahead, this year's 9pm and midnight harbour displays include more than 80,000 dazzling effects shot into the sky, 25,000 of which will fire from the Harbour Bridge.

First Nations artist Blak Douglas has taken charge of the 9pm show, presenting silhouettes featuring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who will dance across the pylons of Sydney Har-

bour Bridge while a bright display of fireworks resembling the Aboriginal flag shines overhead.

Seventh-generation pyrotechnician Fortunato Foti is curating his 25th New Year's Eve fireworks program this year.

"Creating an event of this scale and being responsible for entertaining millions of people across Australia and around the world is what it's all about – it's what drives us each year to do something new, brighter and better," he said.

"We normally do between 400 and 500 fireworks shows a year but nothing compares to the exhilaration of creating Sydney's New Year's Eve displays."

"We promise a show that everyone will enjoy, whether they're watching it around the harbour, at home, or online."

Floodgates thrown open for rapid tests

Continued from Page 1

one million kits per week reasonably easily ... that's without struggling."

Demand for the personal nasal and saliva tests is expected to intensify next week, with the Queensland government abandoning PCR testing requirements for tourists and switching to rapid tests from January 1.

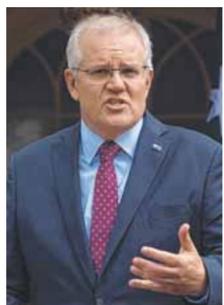
Victorian Health Minister Martin Foley said the 34 million tests would start arriving within days and would be made "freely available, and widely available".

He said state governments were "stepping up" to "fill the gap" left by the Morrison government.

"We would much prefer to have a national approach ... but failing that, as per usual, the states have had to step up and fill the gap that has been left," he said.

"If I had to commentate endlessly on the areas in which the commonwealth hasn't stood up to deliver national leadership on so many areas during the course of this pandemic, I would be sounding like a broken record."

It was a sentiment echoed by Anthony Albanese, who said: "Scott Morrison refuses to step up. We have the NSW government trying to purchase rapid



JUSTIN LLOYD

Mr Morrison on Wednesday

didn't raise any issues with me about that."

The debate over testing comes as Covid-19 infections are surging across much of the nation, fuelled by the end of lockdowns and the more infectious Omicron strain. NSW recorded 11,201 cases on Wednesday, with 625 people in hospital.

More than 157,000 PCR tests were conducted the previous day, with many people waiting hours for their swab.

Victoria recorded 3767 infections from more than 75,000 PCR tests. There are 397 people in Victorian hospitals and 106 of those are being treated in intensive care units.

South Australia recorded 1471 infections from 22,700 tests, with 36 people in hospital. Queensland reported 1589 infections from 35,000 tests. Eight people are in hospital.

Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk confirmed on Wednesday that people arriving in the state would be permitted to supply a rapid antigen test as proof they are negative for Covid-19.

"From January 1, travellers into Queensland from interstate hot spots can use a negative rapid antigen test to satisfy border pass requirements," she said.

It was also reported that NSW

Premier Dominic Perrottet will on Thursday lobby national cabinet for the removal of PCR testing for international arrivals.

The price of rapid antigen tests is fluctuating across the country, selling as high as \$20 in some pharmacies.

Sydney pharmacist Quinn On, who owns a number of independent pharmacies and franchises from Priceline and Discount Drug Stores, said demand had, in some cases, seen prices double.

Before Christmas, his pharmacies sold out of 400 tests at \$12 each within two hours. Struggling to get stock from the wholesaler, he bought from a pharmacy that had an excess at double the price. The tests then retailed for \$20 and still sold out in a matter of hours, he said.

Mr On said the demand for rapid test stock had seen manufacturers and suppliers become selective with who they supplied.

"They now want you to pay upfront. They basically want the money in their account before you pick them up," he said.

"There's a lot of brands on the market and no one knows how long demand will last, especially when you've got the government saying they're going to give it out for free."

Premier pads up to rescue fifth Test

MATTHEW DENHOLM

Tasmania insists the fifth Ashes Test will be held in Hobart as planned, with the state government appearing to be open to a pragmatic application of Covid requirements for touring squads.

The island state's current coronavirus rules include seven-day isolation for close contacts, a rule already bent in NSW to allow the fourth Test to proceed as planned next Wednesday.

However, having fought hard to win the fifth Test in a competitive tender, Premier Peter Gutwein is determined to not to lose Tasmania's first Ashes contest.

"The Tasmanian government remains fully committed to the fifth Ashes Test being played in Hobart (from January 14), in what will be a historic event for the state," a government spokeswoman said.

"The government is continuing to work with Cricket Australia and Public Health to ensure that the match operates under the approved Covid safety plan and all Covid-related matters are managed effectively."

"Anyone who tests positive for Covid-19 in Tasmania will be assessed and managed in accordance with appropriate protocols."

The government has yet to clarify whether the cricket squads would be exempt from the seven-day isolation requirement for close contacts, or the state's 14-day mask-wearing requirement for casual contacts.

However, the use of broad phrases such as "continuing to work", "managed effectively" and "appropriate protocols" suggest the government is leaving enough wriggle room to prevent a case or two shutting down the Test match.

While a strict application of the seven-day rule would be a match-breaker, there is a high level of confidence within government and cricket administration that the match will proceed.

Sources suggested it would take a very significant outbreak within one or both team camps for Tasmania to back out of, or close down, the game.

SPORT P24

Health chief backs move to unified national plan

LYDIA LYNCH

After two years of border wars and differing medical advice between states, Queensland's chief health officer believes Australia will move to a more unified pandemic response in 2022.

Visitors to Queensland will no longer face eight-hour waits for PCR tests after the state announced it would scrap the requirement from January 1.

Inbound travellers will still need to take an over-the-counter rapid antigen test, available at pharmacies and supermarkets, before entering Queensland but this requirement will be axed once 90 per cent of the state has received two vaccine doses.

In a sign Queensland is relaxing its headline approach to managing the pandemic, the state is now considering slashing isolation times for asymptomatic Covid-19 cases and their household contacts down to five days, in line with other states.

Chief health officer John Gerard said Queensland had already begun paring back contact tracing of people who might have been exposed in hospitality venues. "In broad terms, we are pulling back to isolating those who are sick and their immediate

household contacts – that is the main group that we are contacting," he said. "We are moving forward ... We cannot afford to quarantine the entire population of Queensland, we know that."

Dr Gerrard said he and chief health officers in other states were "working towards a more unified approach" now Omicron cases were increasing across the country.

"I think, as we move forward and the virus spreads across all of Australia, it will be easier to have a unified approach, given we are no longer trying to completely eliminate the virus."

Scott Morrison will host a national cabinet meeting on Thursday to discuss a new definition of a close contact to ensure Australia could "keep moving" and people could "get on with their lives".

Moves to standardised testing and isolation requirements have been welcomed by Queensland's tourism industry, which has been knocked by prolonged border closures and repeated lockdowns.

"It has been an extremely confusing two years for all of us because there have been different rules in every state and territory so we welcome a move towards national rules," said Queensland Tourism Industry Council chief executive Daniel Gschwind.