

COVID-19 Update: 21 August

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Last week, we saw case numbers surpass 600 for consecutive days with over 800 cases today. On Friday, the Government announced a suite of new restrictions for everyone in Greater Sydney and LGAs of concern. In positive news, the Central Coast has been removed from the definition of “Greater Sydney”. But Wollongong and the Blue Mountains remain part of Greater Sydney.

The ACT also remains in lockdown with a further 12 cases on Friday. Victoria recorded 61 new cases today as their situation escalates, and Queensland has imposed strict border restrictions requiring workers to have had at least one vaccination to enter the state.

From Monday, 23 August 2021, the following new restrictions will apply:

For everyone in Greater Sydney:

- Masks will be required to be worn outdoors except when exercising
- Parents are encouraged to keep their children at home out of childcare if possible.
- Authorised workers will also need to have a permit if their work takes them outside the Sydney area.

For everyone in LGAs of concern (currently Bayside, Blacktown, Burwood, Campbelltown, Canterbury-Bankstown, Cumberland, Fairfield, Georges River, Liverpool, Parramatta, Strathfield, and some suburbs of Penrith):

- Curfews will be introduced from 9pm to 5am (except for authorised workers, emergencies or medical care);
- Outdoor exercise is limited to one hour per day;
- Authorised workers who work outside their LGA are only permitted to work if rapid antigen testing is implemented at their work-site OR they have had their first vaccination dose by August 30.
- From Saturday, 28 August 2021, authorised workers from these LGAs are required to carry a permit from Service NSW declaring that they are an authorised worker;
- From Saturday, 28 August 2021, anyone entering one of these LGAs for the purposes of work must carry a worker permit issued by Service NSW.

Rapid antigen testing has been approved for use by the Therapeutic Goods Administration and we have been told that Transport will begin rolling out this testing soon. Transport are only able to use this testing under the supervision of a registered medical professional.

Given that these new restrictions were only announced yesterday, we are not sure how employers are going to interpret and apply them, particularly if they operate in the regions and interact with Sydney. If you have any issues with how your employer applies these new restrictions, be sure to contact us and we'll work through it with you.

Following the positive case of a tester at Central last weekend, the subsequent directions to around 240 employees to stay home and then the cancellation of all regional services, leaves many questions that still remain regarding the process. Here is what we've learned:

Transport for NSW through its Incident Management Team, has taken on some functions delegated from NSW Health in the contact tracing and isolate regime. To do this, they have been provided with a risk management "matrix" to determine what has to be done in the event of a positive case.

In taking on this role, Transport have determined to take an overly cautious approach meaning that potentially more workers will be affected than if NSW Health performed the function.

This means that a direction could either come from NSW Health, Transport or your employer for you to not come into work due to a COVID exposure.

This is concerning on a number of levels, for example, do Transport have access to QR code's or are they reliant on rosters to trace? If they are to rely on diagrams and rosters, will they have people with operational experience to determine the movement of workers? How much power will employers have in designating people close or casual contacts? What oversight will Transport and Health have over employers? We are urgently seeking more information on how this works but given this was sprung on Transport with no warning they don't have the answers yet.

From Monday, Sydney Trains will revert to a weekend timetable in the metro area ostensibly to reduce movement of workers in and out of the affected LGAs. We have raised the issue repeatedly this week saying that this move is ill conceived and will fail to achieve its stated purpose for two reasons:

On a weekday timetable, drivers and guards work on one sector for their shift meaning that their

movement is limited to one area. Weekend working is based on “cross-sector” working meaning that drivers and guards can work across all three sectors in one shift. Operational staff will now work through multiple LGAs of concern each shift rather than just on weekends.

Patronage on the network throughout this period has been consistent regardless of the constantly changing restrictions (based on official patronage numbers from OPAL). By reducing timetables, it is likely that the same amount of passengers will be forced onto fewer services, putting these passengers at risk due to reduced physical distancing.

Other transport services across Sydney will also be affected as the focus shifts to ensuring that emergency workers and health workers are able to get to work.

Buses in Sydney will move to an altered Saturday timetable with services added to the tradie peak and some pulled out of the business peak where Opal data says it can be done safely. Depots will go to Sunday timetables where there are not enough staff to service a Saturday timetable.

Transport has also flagged the creation of two ‘shifts’ of employees. This would allow rotation of work between the two groups so everyone had the same number of days off, and would allow services to continue if one group was exposed to the virus.

We’re unsure of how this would look but are working closely with employers to make sure that no employees are worse off. The RTBU will not tolerate employers saving money by paying people less when Transport is paying them normal operational rates.

We’re still waiting on clarification from Transport on what timetable is going to run for Trams but will continue to be proactive and make sure employees are looked after regardless of the work done. We’re also seeking clarification on changes to CMET services in Canberra and bus and Tram services in the Newcastle area.