



IN CONFIDENCE

22 March 2024

Ms Leeanne McAviney  
Assistant Auditor-General, Sector Performance  
Office of the Auditor-General | Te Mana Arotake

Tēnā koe Leeanne

Thank you for your letter of 26 February 2024 following up on the Auditor-General's recommendations in the Performance Audit of the Coordination of the All-of-Government Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic in 2020. I appreciate your office's engagement on this matter, and the extension in deadline, to ensure we have been able to respond fully to your letter and the recommendations.

I am aware that the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, National Emergency Management Agency, the Ministry of Health, and other agencies are writing to you separately regarding the recommendations. In developing our response, we have spoken to DPMC and NEMA, but there are areas where they are best placed, and are more appropriate, to respond as the matters fall within their remit.

### **The Commission's role in the Government's Covid-19 pandemic response and recovery**

I thought it might be useful to set out the Commission's roles and responsibilities in respect of the matters covered by the recommendations.

In 2019, Cabinet mandated DPMC as the all-of-government lead for the Covid-19 response. In support of that effort, and DPMC's leadership, the Public Service Commission played a role in the following areas consistent with its role in the system:

- Providing machinery of government advice
- Preparing and issuing workforce guidance in areas such as flexible working; vaccination policy, and pay
- Supporting business continuity and providing regular assurance reporting to ministers
- Supporting chief executives and their wellbeing
- Leading the Workforce Mobility Hub, which was established to enable rapid deployment of people and expertise to key areas of need.

The details in the attachment to this letter set out how the Commission undertook that role, as well as the work we have led since to learn from the Covid-19 experience across the system.

IN CONFIDENCE

I note that there is work underway to respond to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Covid-19 Lessons learned, which is yet to report.

I also note that the lessons learned from Covid-19 were relevant to the Public Service's response to the 2023 North Island Weather Response. A Ministerial Inquiry is underway and due to report shortly on that matter, which will influence further actions taken by agencies in respect of emergency management and response arrangements.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide an update on the work we have undertaken on the areas you identified in the performance audit. If you have any questions about the material covered in this letter, one of my Deputy Commissioners, Alastair Hill, is our main point of contact and will be happy to assist you. You are also welcome to contact me directly.

Thank you again for writing to me.

Nāku noa, nā



Heather Baggott (she/her)  
Te Tumu Whakarae mō Te Kawa Mataaho  
Acting Public Service Commissioner | Head of Service

## **Information regarding the Public Service Commission's role in the Covid-19 response and lessons learned since**

### **Capturing lessons learned from the Covid-19 experience – Recommendations 1-6**

Your letter notes that the Commission intended to capture and embed lessons from the Covid-19 experience. The Commission undertook a process in 2023 to prepare a Covid-19 narrative, including the lessons learned from the Public Service Leadership Team's experiences.

The narrative sets out the Commission's role in the system, what the Commission did during the pandemic, and how some of things have been embedded. For example, the Mobility Hub supported the Cyclone Gabrielle response and has evolved to support secondments and other initiatives where surge capacity might be required. And the Key Role Alternative model, introduced for chief executives and senior leaders to give them a break and to support business continuity, has been embedded as an ongoing approach.

We have attached a copy of the PSLT Lessons Learned for your awareness.

### **Roles and responsibilities around emergency management – Recommendation 1**

The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet was mandated by the Cabinet as the All-of-Government lead for the Covid-19 response. As the head of the National Security System, DPMC is also responsible for National Risk Framework, led through a dedicated Directorate within DPMC, which provides stewardship and leadership of the all-of-government strategic crisis management arrangements.

DPMC is responsible for coordination and governance of risks and crisis management through the Officials' Committee for Domestic and External Coordination (ODESC).

We leave for DPMC and NEMA to comment on actions regarding national crisis and emergency management roles and responsibilities in the round. As noted in our letter, the Public Service Commission's role through the Covid-19 response and in relation to emergency management is:

- Providing machinery of government advice
- Preparing and issuing workforce guidance in areas such as flexible working; vaccination policy, and pay
- Supporting business continuity and providing regular assurance reporting to ministers
- Supporting chief executives and their wellbeing
- Leading the Workforce Mobility Hub, which was established to enable rapid deployment of people and expertise to key areas of need

These form the basis for our substantive comments and updates on your recommendations below.

### **Workforce planning and deployment – Recommendation 3**

Your letter highlights recommendation 3 regarding the development and maintenance of workforce plans. Within our remit we have taken a number of actions in recent years to support flexible deployment and surge capacity within the Public Service system. This has included learning from the Covid-19 experience to embed systems and processes, as well as developing new practices through the North Island weather events last year.

Towards the end of 2020, reviews of the Covid-19 response recommended that the Commission was best placed to provide system level oversight and ongoing support for workforce deployment.

The Commission supported this recommendation and on 11 December 2020, the Commission assumed responsibility for critical COVID workforce resourcing from DPMC. A small Workforce Mobility Hub team was established, combining cross system critical Covid-19 workforce resourcing and the manual Workforce Deployment approach.

Our reporting from the time showed that, in total, around 4,500 public servants (core Public Service) were redeployed, through various mechanisms, on the Covid-19 effort.

- During the initial phase through 2020, over 3,500 including:
  - 2,500 to MIQ
  - 100 to the Ministry of Health's Response Unit
  - Up to 500 in contact centres for contact tracing
  - 600 in the original all-of-government team and Ops Centre
- In 2021 the Mobility Hub alone redeployed over 750 public servants using its deployment approach.
  - Around 570 of these for additional contact tracing workforce

The Hub's success is largely due to the network of Agency Workforce Leads that have been established across the system. Each agency has an Agency Workforce Lead who is the point of contact between their agency and the Hub.

Learning from that experience, we:

- have developed a digital platform for capturing surge workforces
- have developed information on temporary assignments and secondments, and are currently looking at overtime arrangements for staff-sharing in response to better enable inter-agency interoperability / staff sharing during responses
- are participating in the NEMA-led Ru Whenua national exercise to test the functionality of the Hub to source people from the system to support an emergency response
- are working with the Agency Workforce Leads to build connections between them and Emergency Management and Business Continuity staff across agencies leading to a shift from reactive to proactive identification
- have identified the need to undertake and support system- and agency-level long-term workforce planning.

The Hub played an important role during the North Island Weather Event response working alongside NEMA.

During the 2023 weather response, our systems and processes for workforce deployment enabled us to facilitate around 90 people through Public Information Management training, which was identified early as a critical system need – both for the Public Service, and local government and regional emergency management. This was rapidly arranged and deployed training, delivered in collaboration with Wellington Regional Emergency Management Office, to support the initial weather response effort both on the ground in Northland, Auckland, and East Coast, as well as in Wellington.

We also facilitated a small number of Strategic Communications leads who were deployed to regions to replace or support local emergency management staff. We are now working with DPMC and the Public Service Communications Head of Profession, which is co-hosted by the Commission, to define strategic communications emergency management roles and requirements, and identifying a cohort of experienced public servants who can be called upon in future to fill short-term deployment needs.

### **Machinery of government arrangements supporting emergency management – Recommendations 2, 3, 5, 6**

More recently, the Commission has been working with DPMC around machinery of government arrangements for an Emergency Management Bill. The previous Government introduced the Bill to replace the Civil Defence Emergency Management (CDEM) Act 2002.

The Bill is not a fundamental transformation of the emergency management system but would make some practical improvements to ensure the system can meet current and future needs. For example, in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the key people and organisations within the emergency management system including the Director of Emergency Management, Controllers, Recovery Managers, government agencies, local authorities, Emergency Management Committees (currently Civil Defence Emergency Management (CDEM) Groups), emergency services and critical infrastructure entities (currently lifeline utilities).

The Commission's input into the Bill has been around clarifying the role and responsibility of the chief executive of NEMA, who also holds the statutory role of Director of Emergency Management, and the Bill, if progressed will be led by DPMC and NEMA. The Bill is due to be considered by the Cabinet Legislative Committee shortly as part of the Government's legislative programme.

### **Alternate National Crisis Management Centre – Recommendations 2, 3, 5**

We are also engaged with NEMA on their work to establish a model for the Alternate National Crisis Management Centre in Auckland. That work is primarily in two areas:

1. System capability to build the response and recovery workforce. From a system perspective this relies mainly on our engagement through Heads of HR and the Mobility Hub to support deployment.
2. Commission organisational arrangements to support a contingent workforce for our own functions to be deployed to the Auckland NCMC.

That work is ongoing.

## **Leading through COVID-19**

Te Tumu Whakarae mō Te Kawa Mataaho

**Public Service Commissioner**

Te Ohu Tumu Whakarae i the Ratonga Tūmatanui

**Public Service Leadership Team**

September 2023

## Commissioner's Introduction

COVID-19 has had a profound impact on our world, including here in Aotearoa New Zealand. The virus reached our shores in February 2020. Even before its arrival important steps were being taken by the Government to protect New Zealanders and to save lives and livelihoods.

From the outset, the Public Service was at the forefront of the COVID-19 response. As the pandemic unfolded, it tested our systems, services and people.

Combating the virus at the border, protecting the community, supporting businesses and meeting the needs of our most vulnerable citizens has been an enormous and demanding task.

It's spanned the breadth of the Public Service and beyond. And required us to be agile, to innovate and to learn. Often at pace, and always in the public eye.

Our advice, planning, and delivery contributed to the Government's overall strong COVID-19 response with positive outcomes that are noted internationally.

The professionalism and spirit of service to the community demonstrated by public servants throughout the pandemic is something New Zealanders can be proud of.

A wide range of reviews have been undertaken across various dimensions of the pandemic worldwide, including over 70 reviews and reports of the COVID-19 response here in New Zealand. Together, they provide important lessons to strengthen preparedness and responses to future pandemics and national emergency situations.

This paper does not seek to replicate those reviews, but to capture the unique perspective of the Public Service Leadership Team (PSLT), which has led the Public Service through the COVID-19 pandemic, navigating its many twists and turns.

Over the past year, I convened a process with PSLT colleagues to focus on learning from each other's experiences of leading through COVID-19. And how those experiences could relate to a future pandemic or apply to other public service system issues.

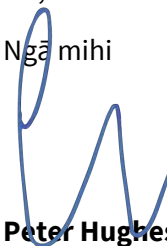
Together we reflected on what worked well, what challenged us, and what will help us in the future. The themes emerging from this process speak to the importance of:

- public trust and confidence
- organising around priorities
- serving and protecting communities
- supporting our people.

I am pleased to provide this paper as an input into the Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19 Lessons Learned (RCOI) to inform its work and recommendations.

On behalf of the PSLT, I would like to extend our thanks and ongoing support to the RCOI for its vital work to strengthen our readiness for, and management of, future pandemics.

Ngā mihi



**Peter Hughes**

Te Tumu Whakarae mō Te Kawa Mataaho  
Public Service Commissioner

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## Purpose

This paper outlines key themes the Public Service Leadership Team identified through their experiences of leading through the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper is being provided as an input into the Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19 Lessons (RCOI) to inform its work and recommendations.

The Public Service has been at the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic response and continues to be active in the ongoing recovery as New Zealand reconnects with the world.

The Public Service has served the public across many dimensions of the pandemic, including delivering health, social, and economic wellbeing related policies and support on behalf of the Government. And worked with iwi, NGOs, local government, businesses and communities to protect our most at-risk individuals and families.

To be better prepared and able to respond and recover from future pandemics, it's important to build on what went well, recognise and acknowledge the things that challenged us, and use the lessons to improve future delivery.

A wide range of reviews on COVID-19 have already been undertaken. And the findings have helped inform improvements in the approach to the pandemic over time.

Public Service agencies are also providing the RCOI with information about their respective roles, narratives, timelines and actions taken during the course of the pandemic response and recovery.

The purpose of this paper is not to repeat that work, but to provide reflections from the PSLT as a collective with the wider system in mind.

## About the Public Service

The Public Service, as part of the executive branch of government, plays a vital role in supporting the government of day to implement its policies, deliver services and improve outcomes for New Zealanders. We advise the government on many pressing issues and prepare for the future as part of our stewardship role.

### Public Service Act 2020

The Public Service Act 2020 (the Act) provides an overarching framework for the Public Service. Setting out its purpose, guiding principles, along with new system leadership and organisational forms that enable greater flexibility to organise around government priorities.

### Role of the Public Service

Under the Act, the Public Service *‘supports constitutional and democratic government, enables both the current Government and successive governments to develop and implement their policies, delivers high-quality and efficient public services, supports the Government to pursue the long-term public interest, facilitates active citizenship, and acts in accordance with the law’*.

The foundational principles that guide the Public Service include political neutrality, free and frank advice, merit-based appointments, open government and stewardship. These principles are supported by Public Service values, including acting impartiality, being accountable, trustworthy, respectful and responsive.

### Spirit of service

The fundamental underpinning of the Public Service is acting with a spirit of service to the community. Many New Zealanders witnessed, first hand, public servants putting their work and communities ahead of their own needs as the pandemic hit our shores.

Ever since, public servants have been at the front line of the COVID-19 response and recovery. And many have gone the extra mile, working hard to protect our communities and to deliver services and supports to individuals and families in need.

### Public Service Commissioner

The Public Service Commissioner is a statutory role and has three main areas of responsibility.

#### Chief executive of Te Kawa Mataaho

The Commissioner is chief executive officer of Te Kawa Mataaho | Public Service Commission (the Commission). The

Commission supports the Commissioner to build Public Service capability and lead the change process to ensure that the Public Service is unified around a common spirit of service, principles and values, and able to work as a single system in the service of New Zealand and New Zealanders.

### Commissioner

The role of Public Service Commissioner also confers a range of functions, responsibilities, and legislative duties, including promoting integrity, accountability and transparency in the Public Service. The Commissioner employs Public Service chief executives and departmental secretaries. And provides guidance and support to Public Service agencies.

### Head of Service

The Commissioner is also Head of Service. In this role the Commissioner provides leadership of the Public Service (and to some extent the wider public sector) including its agencies and workforce and oversight of the performance of the system.

### Role in relation to chief executives

The Commissioner is responsible for reviewing and advising on the performance of Public Service chief executives but has no power to direct chief executives in their

statutory responsibilities or the work of their agencies.

Issuing directions and setting priorities for the work of agencies is a matter for responsible ministers, to whom departmental chief executives owe their responsibilities.

### **Commissioner's direction for the Public Service**

Te Kahu Tuatini is the Commissioner's three yearly briefing to Parliament on the state of the Public Service. It highlights both progress and challenges on the journey being taken to modernise and join-up the Public Service.

Te Kahu Tuatini is also forward looking and sets out the Commissioner's direction for the Public Service over the next three years. This direction is reflected in a suite of expectations across seven key areas covering:

- better outcomes and services
- trust, confidence, integrity
- open government and active citizenship
- Māori-Crown relationship
- how we organise and work
- diversity and inclusion
- our people.

### **State of the Public Service | Te Kahu Tuatini**

The Commissioner is required to prepare a three-yearly briefing on the state of the Public Service.

This is a new requirement introduced under the Public Service Act 2020. And together with long-term insights briefings (also required by agencies three-yearly under the Act) is a task designed to support the Public Service deliver on its stewardship role.



The inaugural state of the Public Service briefing, Te Kahu Tuatini, was tabled in the House of Representatives in December 2022.

It outlines the current state of the public service and sets out the Commissioner's direction over the next three years

[www.publicservice.govt.nz/assets/DirectoryFile/State-of-the-Public-Service-Digital.pdf](http://www.publicservice.govt.nz/assets/DirectoryFile/State-of-the-Public-Service-Digital.pdf)

The direction set by the Commissioner builds on the enabling platform provided through the Public Service Act reforms.

Taking the Commissioner's direction forward will place the Public Service on a stronger footing to address existing needs and to meet future challenges.

This includes increasing the agility of the Public Service to be better prepared for and respond to crises in the future, including pandemic situations.

## Public Service Leadership Team

The Commissioner convenes the Public Service Leadership Team (PSLT). The PSLT is made up of department secretaries and chief executives of agencies ([see current list here](#)).

As a group, the PSLT stewards the system by taking prime responsibility for system alignment and ensuring the Public Service takes a joined-up approach to major issues.

### Commissioner convened a process with PSLT around COVID-19

Between July 2022 and July 2023, the Commissioner convened a process with the PSLT to focus on learning from each other's experiences of leading through COVID-19. And how those experiences could relate to a future pandemic or apply to other public service system issues.

Together, the PSLT discussed a range of dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the health response, managed isolation and quarantine, border management, and the community response.

## Framework

Through conversations and reflection cross-cutting themes emerged that resonated with PSLT and spoke to the challenges of leading through the fast-paced and uncertain path of the pandemic in New Zealand. Through the process, PSLT reflected on:

- What helped us
- What challenged us
- What we will take forward.

### Themes from leading through COVID-19



### Public trust and confidence



This central and enabling theme recognises that to be effective in our communities and make a difference we need the trust and confidence of New Zealanders and those that serve them.

### Organising around priorities



The pandemic response and recovery has required the Public Service and its leaders to be agile, join-up and address complex issues while also delivering and adapting business as usual services in a pandemic context.

### Serving and protecting communities



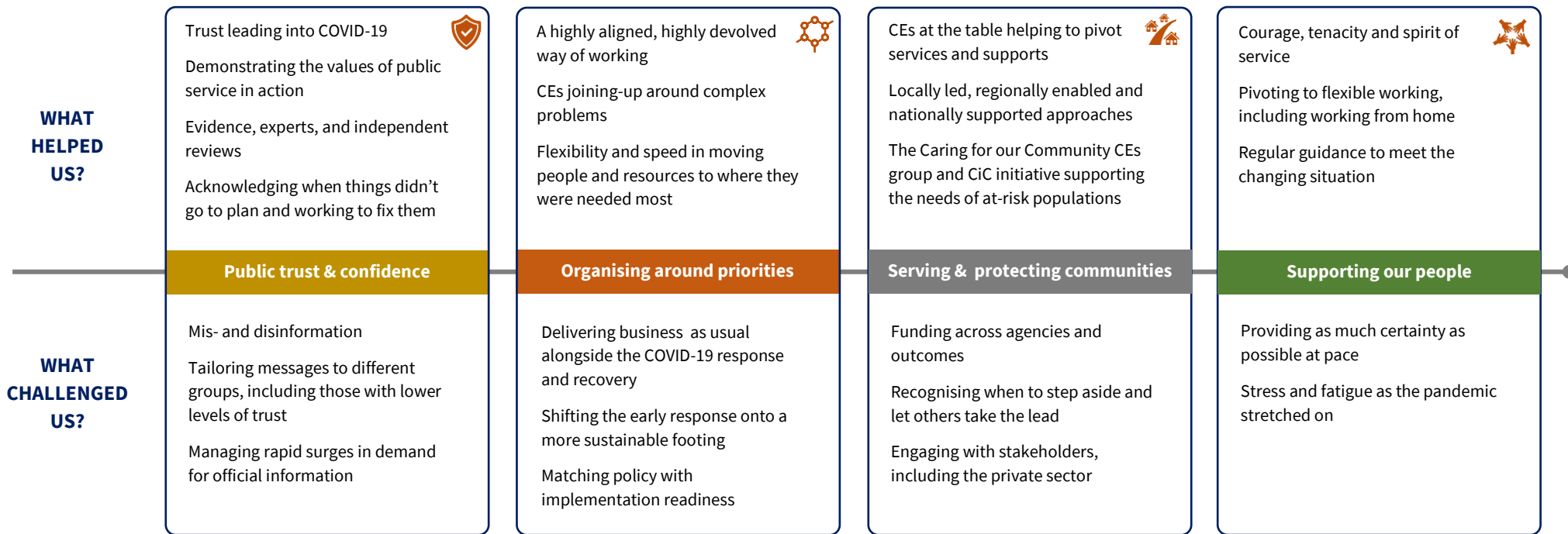
Working alongside communities, iwi, local government and the private sector to keep New Zealanders safe and to protect and promote wellbeing (including for our most vulnerable citizens) has required us to innovate and learn.

### Supporting our people



Public servants have been at the forefront of the COVID-19 response and recovery, demonstrating a spirit of service to the community, and supporting our people and their wellbeing continues to be an important focus.

# Overview of themes



## WHAT WE'RE TAKING FORWARD

-  Promoting active citizenship and increasing people's involvement in policy and service development in ways that build trust and confidence
- Advancing open government, increasing proactive release of information, and upholding integrity
- Preparing for future challenges (including pandemics) informed by evidence and (long-term) insights
-  Configuring the Public Service around priorities and outcomes
- Using arrangements such as interdepartmental executive boards and system leadership roles to organise, join-up and improve delivery
- Looking at settings to enable greater flexibility of the Public Service workforce to meet future needs
-  More engagement and partnering with communities to develop services that work for them
- Embedding public service regional leadership and working in partnership with stakeholders
- Ensuring system settings enables service to be adapted and shaped
-  Acknowledging our people and their spirit of service
- 'Flexible by default' working to increase the resilience of the Public Service to operate in times of crisis, including remotely when necessary
- Growing and supporting our leaders

## **THEME 1 | Public trust and confidence**

Trust provides legitimacy for the Public Service to operate and is crucial for maintaining social cohesion. The Public Service is working to maintain and build trust and confidence by delivering responsive and reliable services and by demonstrating integrity, operating transparently, and preparing for the future.

Trust and its drivers are amplified during times of crisis. The OECD notes that *‘trust is even more important in periods of crisis where swift and wide compliance with policy measures is required to minimise potentially disastrous impacts for society as a whole’*.

And they observed a pattern in European regions where COVID-19 compliance and containment policies were influenced by pre-

pandemic levels of trust towards policy makers.<sup>1</sup>

This indicates that when people have high levels of trust in public institutions, they are more likely to follow the rules and abide by advice from government and officials.

### **What helped us**

#### **Public trust was high leading into the pandemic**

New Zealand’s Public Service has an enviable reputation for trust and integrity and performs strongly on range of international studies and indices.

There was a noticeable increase in the ‘trust in the Public Service brand’ throughout 2020, spiking at 69 percent in December 2020.<sup>2</sup> Trust based on people’s experiences of the Public Service has remained high during the COVID-19 pandemic, hovering around 80 percent (Figure 1).

The uplift in public trust in the public service brand throughout 2020 coincided with

significant public health measures, such as restrictions of gatherings, lockdowns, testing, and other measures introduced to protect New Zealanders lives. This included target financial assistance to cushion the economic effects of the pandemic and protect livelihoods.

#### **What drives public trust**

The OECD Framework on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (2017) identifies five main public governance drivers along two dimensions:

- competence: government’s responsiveness and reliability in delivering public services and anticipating new needs
- values: government’s principles of integrity, openness, and fairness.

In 2021, the OECD’s framework was expanded in response to the COVID-19 crisis to also include cultural, socio-economic and political drivers as well as governments capacity to address global and intergenerational issues.

<sup>1</sup> Brezzi, M., et al. (2021). An updated OECD framework on drivers of trust in public institutions to meet current and future challenges, *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*,

No. 48, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b6c5478c-en>.

<sup>2</sup> Kiwis Count Survey - see also [www.privacy.org.nz/blog/trust-in-government-and-covid-19/](http://www.privacy.org.nz/blog/trust-in-government-and-covid-19/) for commentary on trust across jurisdictions.

The RCOI terms of reference note that ‘the measures New Zealand put in place to respond to COVID-19 generally enjoyed high levels of public support and were positively reviewed by independent experts’.

The range of public health measures were considered vital because widespread community transmission of the virus, without a vaccination being available, presented a significant threat to population health and associated risks of overwhelming the health

system. Lockdowns enabled the Public Service to organise and prepare. In general, there was good adherence to public health measures, particularly in the first phase of the pandemic response.

### Demonstrating the values of public service in action

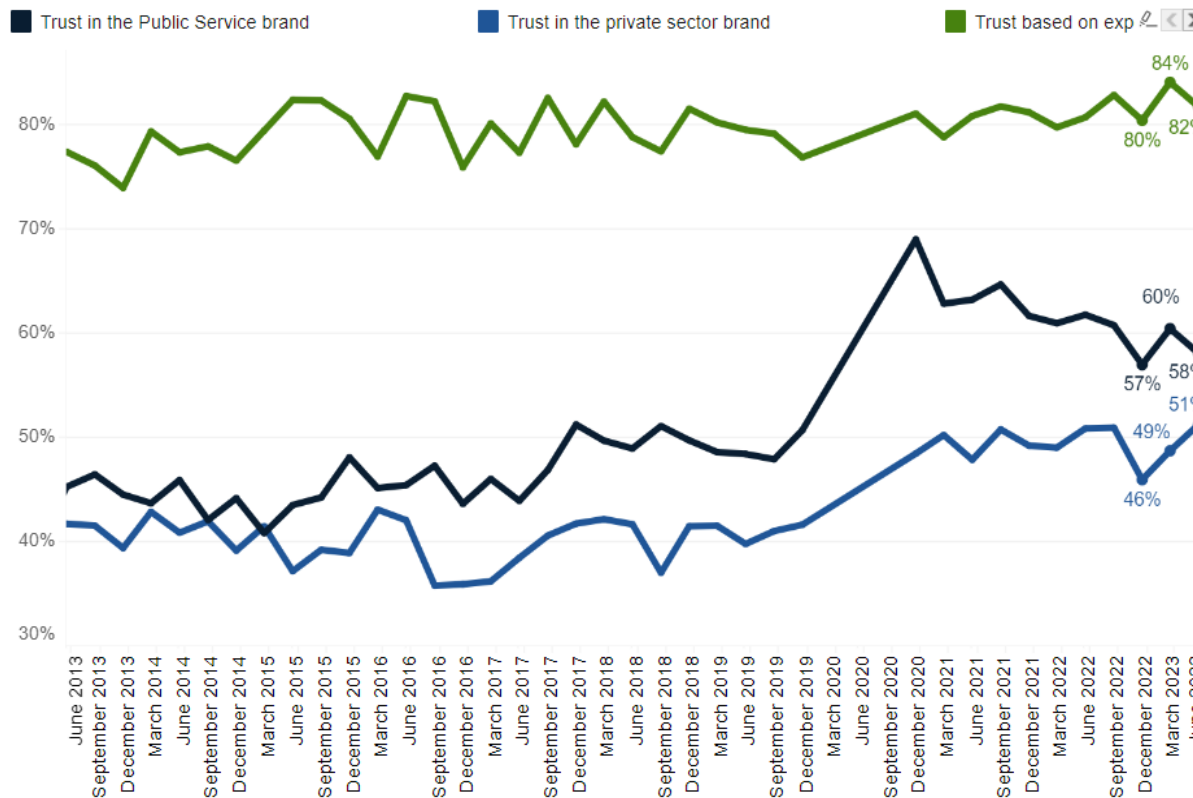
The pandemic opened a window into the world of the Public Service, its values and what it stands for.

From the outset of the pandemic New Zealanders saw public servants advise Government, deliver services, and keep the business of government going in a time of crisis.

Part of this was the visible leadership demonstrated by Public Service secretaries and chief executives and other senior public servants fronting the media and answering questions.

But was also reflected in the spirit of service to the community. Thousands of public servants up and down the country demonstrated this through delivering essential services and by going the extra mile, often putting others needs ahead of their own.

Figure 1. Trust in public services and public/private brand by quarter, June 2013-June 2023 (KiwisCount)



The social license this afforded helped enable innovation and for work to occur at the speed needed in a crisis.

### **Evidence, experts, and independent reviews**

Being transparent as possible about the actions being taken, progress being made, and challenges ahead are important for building trust.

The Public Service worked hard to make information regularly available on matters such as COVID-19 testing, case numbers, the MIQ situation and vaccination status. Evidence and experts were used to identify effective interventions and to help model the trajectory of the pandemic under different scenarios.

Independent reviews also aided transparency by shining a light on the Public Service response. Acting on these reviews and evidence-based public health advice was an important element of adapting and

strengthening the response - placing it on a stronger, longer-term footing.

### **Acknowledging when things didn't go to plan and working to fix them**

The pandemic often required rapid decisions (at times with limited or incomplete information) coupled with equally rapid implementation. Adjustments were necessary in light of new information or where implementation ran into unforeseen issues. Mistakes also occurred.

Being open about limitations in advice and acknowledging when things did not go according to plan are important to the values of the public service and the integrity that underpins it. Public Service leaders demonstrated this by owning issues and working quickly to both fix and learn from them.

In March 2023, the OECD released its report into the 'Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in New Zealand'.<sup>3</sup> In their report the OECD noted the Public Service was 'effective and

honest' and attributed the success of the COVID-19 response to 'high confidence in the function of a politically neutral, effective and trusted public service that worked in a co-ordinated manner.'<sup>4</sup> The report reinforces the idea that integrity and openness remain critical to building and maintaining trust in public services and in government more generally.

### **What challenged us**

The actions of the state in a pandemic can be significant. Restrictions on movement and people's freedoms rightly require sound evidence, a high threshold in law, with measures that are timebound and subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

### **Mis- and disinformation**

Some individuals and groups held strong and conflicting views on the Government's approach to pandemic management and on the public health evidence underpinning it. As vaccines became available, some sought to undermine public confidence in

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<sup>3</sup> New Zealand was selected for this study, in part because of the success of the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Retrieved from

<https://www.oecd.org/publications/drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-in-new-zealand-948accf8-en.htm>

<sup>4</sup> OECD. (2023). *Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in New Zealand*, Building Trust in Public Institutions, OECD

Publishing, Paris. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1787/948accf8-en>



vaccination as a key health measure designed to protect the wider community and to aid New Zealand's recovery.

For example, inaccurate and misleading information circulated on social media platforms and through overseas influence in different communities. This hampered official communication efforts on the safety and benefits of vaccination. And people discontented with the Government's COVID-19 policies protested around the country and occupied Parliament in 2022.

Mis-information wasn't confined to New Zealand. It circulated widely across jurisdictions, in what the WHO describes as an infodemic.<sup>5</sup> A Lancet report found that 'all countries proved to be highly vulnerable to disinformation and misinformation regarding the pandemic, with one study documenting that 46 percent of people in the UK and 48 percent of people in the United States were

exposed to false information.'<sup>6</sup> Research from an OCED study suggests non-trusting and high (social media) trusting respondents reported significantly higher sharing intentions for false news than those with trust in institutions.<sup>7</sup>

Some groups also expressed privacy concerns. For example, about how vaccine pass information might be used by officials and government, beyond the stated of purpose of pandemic management. Data sovereignty arose as a contested area, including in relation to Māori data as part of the vaccine roll out.<sup>8</sup>

### Getting our message across

Getting our message across and tailoring it to different groups with different needs and preferences challenged our usual ways of communicating.



*There was 'a high level of hesitancy as a result of misinformation, confusing messaging, linguistically inaccessible content and changing rules and settings.'*

*Ministry for Ethnic Communities | final report on COVID-19 uptake fund*

This was compounded where groups had lower trust in government and officials. Different responses were developed during the pandemic, for example for Māori, Pacific Peoples and disabled people. But at times lagged the mainstream particularly in the early stages of the pandemic.

Efforts were undertaken to counter misinformation and to bring in trusted voices and messaging from different communities. One example of this is the communications strategy led by the Ministry of Pacific Peoples

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<sup>5</sup> An infodemic is 'too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response' See - [www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1) World Health Organization (2022). See also - WHO policy brief: COVID-19 infodemic management.'

[www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Policy\\_Brief-Infodemic-2022.1](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Policy_Brief-Infodemic-2022.1)

<sup>6</sup> Prof Jeffrey D Sachs, PhD, Prof Salim S Abdool Karim, MBChB PhD, Prof Lara Akinin, PhD, Joseph Allen, DSc, Kirsten Brosbøl, MA, Francesca Colombo, MSc et al. (2022). Lancet Commission on COVID-19 Lessons. *Lancet* 2022; 400: 1224–80. Retrieved from [www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2822%2901585-9](https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2822%2901585-9)

<sup>7</sup> OECD (2022). Misinformation and disinformation: An international effort using behavioural science to tackle the spread of misinformation, *OECD Public Governance Policy Papers*, No. 21, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b7709d4f-en>.

<sup>8</sup> See [www.privacy.org.nz/blog/analysis-high-court-2021-review-of-ministry-decisions-about-maori-vaccination-data/](https://www.privacy.org.nz/blog/analysis-high-court-2021-review-of-ministry-decisions-about-maori-vaccination-data/)

using Pacific voices, language and resources. Through these initiatives, coupled with funding, and whānau centred approaches we saw Pacific vaccination rates rise to meet those of non-Pacific peoples.

### Surge in information requests

The demand for information and transparency from officials is naturally high in pandemic situations. The number of official information requests surged, peaking in the second half of 2021 with over 29,600 requests, up from 14,100 in 2016.<sup>9</sup>

The Public Service responded to most of these requests within statutory timeframes (97%), however, the pace and volume of information requests challenged lead agencies in the COVID-19 response and recovery to respond in a timely way.

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<sup>9</sup> Over 27,950 official information requests were recorded between July and December 2022, a 5 percent increase in volume on the previous six months. This is the second largest volume since monitoring began in 2016 (14,100). Only the period July-December 2021 was higher at 29,618, due to an increase in requests during COVID-19. Retrieved from

## What we're taking forward

Trust in the Public Service has been important to the Government's COVID-19 response and recovery efforts. And will be important for future pandemic management too.

### Advancing open government

Trust is built on the effective operation of the Public Service in serving New Zealanders and public servants demonstrating integrity, doing what they say they will - earning people's trust through their conduct and spirit of service.

The PSLT is advancing initiatives that will help to build trust and promote social cohesion, including through Te Korowai Whetū Social Cohesion strategic framework.

<sup>10</sup>

Mis- and disinformation was found to be one of the leading concerns for New Zealanders

[www.publicservice.govt.nz/news/latest-oia-statistics-released-7/](http://www.publicservice.govt.nz/news/latest-oia-statistics-released-7/)

<sup>10</sup> See [www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/community/social-cohesion/strategicframework-formal.pdf](http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/work-programmes/community/social-cohesion/strategicframework-formal.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), March 2023. Let's talk about our national security: National



*The pervasive and global spread of mis- and disinformation... poses far-reaching challenges to governments and societies. For instance, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how misleading or false claims can affect policy uptake and vaccine confidence in ways that can threaten public health and people's lives.*

*OECD good practice principles for public communication*

in a recent public survey on national security matters.<sup>11</sup> Openness and transparency are important for combating mis- and disinformation, which left unchecked can

Security Long-term Insights Briefing. Engaging an increasingly diverse Aotearoa New Zealand on national security risks, challenges and opportunities. Retrieved from [www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-05/National%20Security%20Long-term%20Insights%20Briefing.pdf](http://www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-05/National%20Security%20Long-term%20Insights%20Briefing.pdf)

undermine confidence in public institutions.<sup>12 13</sup>

Work is underway to advance open government initiatives through the New Zealand Open Government Action Plan<sup>14</sup>; by increasing proactive release of information and data; and through a focus on delivering timely responses to OIA requests across public sector agencies.

Digital identity services are also important for building trust and confidence online. The Digital Identity Services Trust Framework, which establishes a legal framework to support the provision of secure and trusted digital identity services for individuals and organisations is due to come into force in July 2024.

The framework will give people more control over their information, support people to prove who they are online, and make it easier for them to access online services. It is also expected to support a mobile and

transitional workforce in pandemic situations by making it easier for workers (e.g. returning health care professionals) to prove their qualifications and eligibility to work.<sup>15</sup>

### **Promoting active citizenship**

Bringing citizens, customers and clients into policy and service design is an important direction of travel too. We saw the fruits of this when communities were engaged in delivering COVID-19 initiatives in ways that reflected the unique needs of their situations. There is more to do in this space. Community engagement tools have been developed through the DPMC Policy Project. Further guidance is being prepared to make this way of working more common and intentional across public service agencies in the future.

### **Preparing for future challenges**

Trust is also associated with governments and public institutions being prepared for future challenges. Investing in research, viral



*Trust, which can be shown by people's willingness to engage with government, is also critical in a crisis, as has been shown during the COVID-19 pandemic. The recent International Science Council (ISC) report into possible future paths of the pandemic notes that community engagement needs to be 'a central activity in preparedness plans for pandemics and other major risks. The public should be engaged as a central part of all control efforts and not only as passive receivers of messages. Societies cannot be treated as homogeneous, and their diversity of views need[s] to be heard if there is to be an effective and cohesive societal response to crises.'*

[Long-term Insights Briefing | Department of Internal Affairs \(2022\)](#)

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<sup>12</sup> OECD (2021). Report on Public Communication: The Global Context and the Way Forward <https://doi.org/10.1787/22f8031c-en>

<sup>13</sup> OECD (2023). Good practice principles for public communication responses to mis- and disinformation, *OECD*

*Public Governance Policy Papers*, No. 30, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6d141b44-en>

<sup>14</sup> New Zealand's Open Government Action Plan – retrieved from <https://ogp.org.nz/new-zealands-plan/fourth-national-action-plan/>

<sup>15</sup> 2 July 2020, Progressing Digital Identity: Establishing a Trust Framework Cabinet paper, Department of Internal Affairs. [www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/Files/Proactive-releases/Sfile/Combined-Digital-Identity-Proactive-Release.pdf](http://www.dia.govt.nz/diawebsite.nsf/Files/Proactive-releases/Sfile/Combined-Digital-Identity-Proactive-Release.pdf)

genomic surveillance and harnessing behavioural and other scientific insights will continue to be important to ensure our efforts are guided by evidence about what works.<sup>16</sup>

COVID-19 has been a disruptive challenge and there are other challenges, as well as opportunities New Zealand will need to prepare for. These include, for example, climate adaptation and harnessing advances in technology, such as artificial intelligence.

Long-term Insights Briefings, introduced under the Public Service Act, are designed to engage New Zealanders in big challenges facing our nation over the medium-term.<sup>17</sup>

The briefings are developed independently from ministers and are helped shaped with public input and engagement. They are presented to Parliament and made publicly available. And help to enhance public debate on long-term issues, including by giving opposition parties access to some of the

public service's professional expertise to help them develop their policies.

The briefings help us collectively as a country to think about, and plan for, the future. The first round of these three-yearly briefings is underway and as this work matures it is expected to inform policies and options for decision-makers.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, the Ministry of Health is investing in behavioural science and evaluation and in research into long

COVID. And the National Science Challenge has looked at what has contributed to COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and uptake.

<sup>17</sup> Links to published Long-term Insights Briefings can be found here [www.publicservice.govt.nz/publications/long-term-insights-briefings/published-briefings/](http://www.publicservice.govt.nz/publications/long-term-insights-briefings/published-briefings/)

## **THEME 2 | Organising around priorities**

As the pandemic spread internationally, rapid action was needed on multiple fronts to protect New Zealanders health and livelihoods. Joining-up and working together was a hallmark of the Public Service response to the threat of COVID-19.

### **What helped us**

#### **A highly aligned and highly devolved approach enabled by the Public Service Act**

Working across agencies is important to improving outcomes but can be challenging. It's made easier when there is clarity of purpose, leadership, clear lines of accountability, and approaches that enable effective local implementation. This includes equipping and empowering communities to take the lead and tailor actions and resources to local needs where appropriate.

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<sup>18</sup> Interdepartmental executive boards have been established to support other areas of priority including climate change, strategic planning, digital, and joining up to eliminate family

Doing this better over time is an important focus for public service leaders and agencies. The PSLT is working to lead a Public Service that is both highly aligned and highly devolved (see box).

This approach has been important for the pandemic response. Including adapting the governance and way agencies organise to meet the rapidly changing COVID-19 situation. As this way of working matures, it will help the Public Service to better prepare for, and respond to, challenges and opportunities in the future.

The Public Service Act, passed in August 2020, helps the Public Service to organise around priorities more easily while retaining appropriate accountability to ministers and Parliament.

#### **Chief executives joining up around complex problems**

Interdepartmental executive boards (IEB)<sup>18</sup> are an example of this. IEBs provide new ways of dealing with complex issues that

violence and sexual violence. For further information about IEBs and how they work see

#### **Highly aligned | highly devolved**

For the Public Service, highly aligned means leaders working collectively across outcomes, sectors and services, strengthening system leadership and strategically aligning the workforce and core 'back office' functions (such as procurement, property and IT). In essence, this provides the leadership and builds the capability and capacity of the Public Service to work as a single system.

Being highly devolved means that agencies and service providers can focus on the things that will make the most difference in communities. This is where organisational flexibility, regional coordination and local decision-making (informed by citizens and service users) can make a positive difference to people's lives.

Te Kahu Tuatini | State of the Public Service (2022)

cannot be solved by a Public Service agency on its own, helping to unify and join-up public service advice and delivery.

[www.publicservice.govt.nz/guidance/supplementary-guidance-note-interdepartmental-executive-board/](http://www.publicservice.govt.nz/guidance/supplementary-guidance-note-interdepartmental-executive-board/)

In January 2021, the Border Executive Board was established as an IEB. The board comprised relevant agency chief executives reporting to the Minister for COVID-19 Response. Together, the members of the board organised and mobilised the response to the threat of COVID-19 at the border.

Groupings of chief executives worked together in less formally mandated ways too. For instance, relevant PSLT members worked together to support communities through the Caring for our Communities Chief Executives Group. Their work played an important role between the Public Service and local government/CDEM and the Public Service and regions/communities.

System leadership roles played an important part too. Under the Act, system leadership is being applied in key functional areas such as property, procurement, information security, data, and digital. And in regional leadership too.

Regional Public Service Commissioners (RPSC) designated by the Commissioner,

played an important role in the pandemic response, working alongside communities, NGOs and iwi, under the oversight of the Secretary for Social Development and the Caring for our Communities Chief Executives Group.

Regional Commissioners connect central government and local needs. They enable priorities to be aligned and for resources to be directed to where they are most needed. Regions are at different levels of maturity with the RPSC model.

The model requires ongoing resourcing to ensure the benefits gained from the COVID-19 experience can be built on and applied to other issues communities are facing, including regions recovering from Cyclone Gabrielle.

### **Flexibility and speed in moving people and resources to where they were needed most**

Key services such as contact tracing, managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ), welfare support for people isolating at home, vaccination roll-out, and targeted financial

initiatives for individuals and businesses were all important parts of the COVID-19 response. The Public Service had to pivot to resource key functions quickly, while also maintaining business as usual activity for key government services. Around 4,500 public servants were redeployed on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The establishment of MIQ saw the Public Service work closely with businesses, including contracting resources to run facilities and services. At its height, MIQ had a workforce of more than 4,000 staff at any one-time and accommodated 12,600 people in 9,000 rooms every 28 days.

Responsibility for MIQ facilities and operations moved to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) on 13 July 2020, one month after Cabinet agreed to designate MBIE as the lead Agency.<sup>19</sup> As the lead Agency for MIQ, MBIE worked alongside the private sector, and with a number of agencies including the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) who played a significant role in MIQ. More than 6,000 NZDF personnel have

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<sup>19</sup> A timeline showing the history and origins of MIQ can be found at: [www.mbie.govt.nz/immigration-and-](http://www.mbie.govt.nz/immigration-and-)

[tourism/isolation-and-quarantine/managed-isolation-and-quarantine/about-miq/miq-timeline/](http://tourism/isolation-and-quarantine/managed-isolation-and-quarantine/about-miq/miq-timeline/)

been involved at all levels of MIQ's operations, both nationally and regionally. For NZDF, this has been their single largest commitment of personnel to a response in more than 50 years.<sup>20</sup>

Over the course of the pandemic MIQ helped nearly 230,000 travellers return safely to New Zealand and supported more than 5,000 members of the community as they faced their own COVID-19 battle.

In December 2020, the Workforce Mobility Hub was established, within Te Kawa Mataaho, to provide a central and ongoing way to quickly find and help deploy resources to where they were needed. The Hub also assisted with Cyclone Gabrielle recovery efforts, with over 65 deployments to support different aspects of the response, such as the Temporary Accommodation Service and NEMA operations including the bunker and regional response teams

Making it easier to move resources and people around to meet priorities is an ongoing focus. And forms part of a wider

strategy development being led by Te Kawa Mataaho.

## **What challenged us**

### **Shifting the early response onto a more sustainable footing**

The early work to address COVID-19 in New Zealand stemmed in large part from the Influenza Pandemic Emergency Action Plan.

While this provided important foundations, COVID-19 tested our degree of preparedness in exercising practical details within existing planning and revealed the need to quickly adjust to the unique challenges of COVID-19.

Emergency events in New Zealand have typically been localised to particular regions. The threat of COVID-19 spanned the country and its impacts, beyond immediate health concerns, were significant and encompassed wider social and economic impacts too. It led to the Government declaring a national state of emergency in March 2020.

While the initial response was rapid, including steps taken to repatriate citizens from Wuhan and close the border, it took longer than desired to stand-up enduring arrangements that would enable a strong all-of-government response beyond the ODESC and lead agency model.

This included mechanisms for bringing in COVID-19 Chief Executives and for wider ongoing PSLT involvement in the response which covered health, social and economic matters amongst other considerations such as trade and support for our Pacific neighbours.

Recommendations from independent reviews and expert strategic public health advice provided valuable insights into areas for improvement. Along with ways to achieve greater alignment between policy and operational delivery including through strengthened central oversight and governance.

Following Cabinet decisions in December 2020, the Department of the Prime Minister

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<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2022). Briefing for the Incoming Minister for COVID-19 Response: Managed Isolation and Quarantine (MIQ). Retrieved from

[www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2022-08/BIM%20Hon%20Ayesha%20Verrall%20-%20COVID-](http://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2022-08/BIM%20Hon%20Ayesha%20Verrall%20-%20COVID-19%20Response%20-%20Managed%20Isolation%20%26%20Quarantine.pdf)

[19%20Response%20-%20Managed%20Isolation%20%26%20Quarantine.pdf](http://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2022-08/BIM%20Hon%20Ayesha%20Verrall%20-%20COVID-19%20Response%20-%20Managed%20Isolation%20%26%20Quarantine.pdf)

and Cabinet was mandated as lead agency for the COVID-19 response. This helped to place the coordination of the all-of-government response on a stronger footing including when more transmissible variants such as Delta and Omicron emerged.

### **Delivering business as usual alongside the COVID-19 response and recovery**

The response to COVID-19 demonstrated what is possible in terms of rapid response when agencies work together. At the same time, it was important BAU services continued to be delivered to the extent possible under pandemic restrictions including lock downs and different Alert Levels or traffic light settings.

Services pivoted to online where possible, including those delivered through education settings, for example. New services were established too, such as the National Alternative Accommodation Service and managed isolation and quarantine facilities. The later were set up at pace (initially in Auckland and then in four other regions) and

staffed by pivoting a range of different workforces.

Public health measures, such as lockdowns and requirements for social distancing, also impacted on some services. For example, preventative health services, such as cancer screening were interrupted leading to backlogs. And the sheer volume of passport requests in the lead-up to border reopening



*At its height, MIQ operated 32 facilities across 5 regions involving a workforce of more than 4,500 staff at any one-time and accommodated 12,600 people in 9,000 rooms every 28 days. MIQ has been responsible for stopping more than 4,600 cases of COVID-19 at the border – where just one case in the community would have compromised our collective efforts to eliminate the virus.*

*Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment- Hīkina Whakatutuki*

outstripped the ability to produce them within usual timeframes.

Providing ministers with assurance that core services could continue to be delivered, while responding to COVID-19, formed part of regular reporting as the pandemic progressed.

This assurance reporting also provided an input into areas where resource allocation could be directed to mitigate emerging risks of under or non-delivery and supported business continuity planning across agencies.<sup>21</sup>

The unrelenting quantum of decisions, risks inherent with a changing and highly dynamic environment, coupled with media scrutiny and public expectation was a lot to carry. Balancing the dual demands of BAU and the fast-paced pandemic response was difficult at times for our leaders. Major reform of the health system was also taking place in parallel with the COVID-19 response.

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<sup>21</sup> Examples of assurance reporting to Ministers can be found here [Search Results - Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission](#)



It was important for PSLT, as a team, to look out for one another and provide advice and support. Te Kawa Mataaho worked to support chief executives and their wellbeing (see supporting our people section).

### **Matching policy with implementation readiness**

Internationally, governments moved quickly to protect their citizens from the pandemic. Legislation and regulations were made at-pace in keeping with the gravity of the emerging situation.

This pattern was observed in New Zealand too. Policy, legislation and initiatives were quickly developed to keep New Zealanders safe and to address pressing public health issues designed to combat the virus at the border and in the community.

While the need for rapid policy development and regulation making was both necessary and important, it impacted on the degree of agency and other consultation possible in the timeframes. A particular challenge was developing policy while ensuring implementation considerations upfront as much as possible.

For example, while transitions between settings, in response to public health advice, were achieved promptly, more time could have enabled a smoother transition and development of more detailed guidance to support agencies and regions.

This includes the challenges associated with the rapid establishment of boundaries for subnational lockdowns. Deeper consideration about what the boundaries meant for different communities and how to best support at-risk individuals and families would have improved the transition.

### **What we're taking forward**

COVID-19 required the Public Service and its leaders to be agile, join-up and address complex issues while also delivering and adapting and delivering 'business as usual services' (BAU) New Zealanders rely on.

#### **Joining-up around priorities**

Looking ahead, the PSLT will continue to join-up around government priorities, using a highly aligned | highly devolved framework (outlined earlier).

This includes using new tools enabled by the Public Service Act, such as IEBs to join-up governance and create operational

alignment around our most pressing issues. This will help ensure policy and implementation continue to inform each other and are strengthened over time.

As well as joining up governance, it is expected advice to ministers' in critical areas will become increasingly joined up too, providing, for example, a consolidated view across policy and implementing agencies within briefings. We saw this type of advice increase during the pandemic as agencies joined up around different aspects of the response.

While the ODESC and lead agency model was the established vehicle for governance leading into the pandemic, PSLT identified that further work is needed to ensure governance of future pandemics is able to quickly benefit from the input and expertise of the wider PSLT team while retaining clear roles and accountabilities.

#### **Increasing flexibility**

There is more to do to make it easier to move people and resources to meet priorities and surge capacity in times of crisis.

The Mobility Hub (the Hub) has supported the COVID-19 response as well as the

National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) during the Cyclone Gabrielle response.

Looking ahead, Te Kawa Mataaho is leading work around policy settings that could enable greater workforce agility in the future (which will also help improve the mobility and rapid deployment of public servants in emergency situations).

### **Building longer-term capacity and capability**

It is important for Public Service agencies to have the right capabilities and capacity to prepare for, respond and recovery from future pandemics.

This relates to physical infrastructure such as ensuring New Zealand has MIQ capacity in the event of a resurgence of COVID-19 and in readiness for future pandemics. Work around this is already underway.

Other organisational and system capabilities are important too. Te Kawa Mataaho is rolling-out a Capability Review Programme

which aims to support chief executives to build capability across the Public Service and ensure agencies can meet future expectations.

This review programme replaces the Performance Improvement Framework and covers both system and agency capabilities.<sup>22</sup> The programme is complemented by developing a better understanding of the sorts of challenges New Zealand is likely to face in the future through Long Term Insights Briefings required of Public Service agencies three yearly.

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<sup>22</sup> Agency Capability Review framework and tools can be found here [www.publicservice.govt.nz/system/system-architecture-](http://www.publicservice.govt.nz/system/system-architecture-)

[and-design/capability-review-programme/agency-capability-reviews/](http://www.publicservice.govt.nz/system/system-architecture-and-design/capability-review-programme/agency-capability-reviews/)



## THEME 3 | Serving and protecting communities

The Public Service has worked hard delivering the Government’s policy responses designed to protect and cushion the impacts of pandemic on people’s lives and livelihoods and to position New Zealand for recovery.

The pandemic touched the lives of New Zealanders across the length and breadth of the country. As at July 2023, over 2.4 million cases of COVID-19 have been recorded and the virus has claimed over 3,100 lives.<sup>23 24</sup>

The pandemic has impacted physical, mental and social wellbeing and brought with it economic uncertainty which has affected whānau and families, workers, businesses, and communities.

The Public Service worked closely with communities during the pandemic to prevent

and contain the spread of the virus, mitigate the effects of lockdowns and border closures, implement a nationwide vaccination programme, and support our most vulnerable citizens. Including those isolating at home and those needing or returning from hospital level care.

Vaccination remains the best defence against COVID-19 and over 12.6 million doses of the vaccine have been administered in New Zealand as at July 2023.<sup>25</sup>

### What helped us?

#### Chief executives at the table

During the pandemic coordination and rapid decision-making between agencies was vital to ensuring the day-to-day needs of communities were met.

This included things like essential supplies, meals, accommodation and housing, health and wellbeing checks, access to communication technology, as well as

information and advice on support available to individuals and families, including wage subsidies.

A high degree of value and importance was placed on relevant chief executives being regularly (at times daily) at the table together to problem solve and make decisions that facilitated the prompt delivery of services and supports to people in need.

Important to the success of this approach was chief executives prioritising their time and not over-engineering the governance (using a light touch).

At times it was challenging. Especially in the early phase of the response where existing systems were tested and others were being established and there was limited information available.

<sup>23</sup> Te Whatu Ora | Health New Zealand (retrieved 24 July 2023) [www.tewhātuora.govt.nz/our-health-system/data-and-statistics/covid-19-data/covid-19-case-demographics/#details-of-covid-19-deaths](http://www.tewhātuora.govt.nz/our-health-system/data-and-statistics/covid-19-data/covid-19-case-demographics/#details-of-covid-19-deaths)

<sup>24</sup> Internationally the IHME estimate total deaths attributed to COVID-19, including unreported deaths, at over 18 million. Retrieved from <https://covid19.healthdata.org/global?view=cumulative-deaths&tab=trend>

<sup>25</sup> Te Whatu Ora | Health New Zealand (for period up to 21 July 2023) [www.tewhātuora.govt.nz/our-health-system/data-and-statistics/covid-vaccine-data#total-vaccinations](http://www.tewhātuora.govt.nz/our-health-system/data-and-statistics/covid-vaccine-data#total-vaccinations)

Chief executives reflected that it was important to hang in there, stay in the meetings, to share context and information, which then enabled the pragmatic decisions to be taken to benefit communities.

### **Locally led, regionally enabled and nationally supported approaches**

Pandemics have unequal impacts, and it is important to protect and care for the most vulnerable people in our communities.<sup>26 27</sup>

Food poverty was an early challenge, particularly in response to lockdowns. It quickly became evident many families on low incomes did not have the means to stock their pantries for extended periods. School closures during lockdowns also meant families with school-aged children were unable to benefit from food provided in education settings.

A lot of good work in the community ensured families received food and essential supplies in the early phases of the pandemic.<sup>28</sup> PSLT



#### **Community connectors**

*People expressed deep gratitude for their Community Connectors, who walked alongside and advocated for them until they were connected with appropriate support. Initially Community Connectors focused on supporting people to safely self-isolate.*

*This included making sure people had access to essentials (such as food, running water, heating, and medication), covering urgent expenses (e.g., rent and utilities bills), and calling regularly to check on wellbeing.*

*After addressing immediate priorities, Connectors focused on linking people to support that could strengthen their independence and protect against the long-term financial, education, and wellbeing impacts of COVID-19.*

*Care in the Community | Real time evaluation (MSD)*

adapted services and move resources around to support regions and locally led initiatives. This included working with iwi and community groups and pivoting MSDs community connectors to support families adjusting to life under COVID-19 settings. The Public Service also used distribution channels to assist foodbanks and communities with essential supplies (this included addressing an oversupply of pork because of lockdowns).

#### **Care in the community**

Over time, work to support individuals and families was placed on a strong footing through the development of the Care in the Community (CiC) initiative. It focused on supporting the health and welfare needs of individuals and families isolating because of COVID-19.

The CiC is an example of a locally led, regionally enabled, and nationally supported initiative deployed during the pandemic. The

<sup>26</sup> COVID-19 – break the cycle of inequality (2021). *The Lancet*. Published Online [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00011-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00011-6) Retrieved from [COVID-19—break the cycle of inequality - The Lancet Public Health](https://www.thelancet.com/public-health)

<sup>27</sup> Ministry of Health. (2020). Updated COVID-19 Māori Response Plan. Retrieved from [Updated COVID-19 Māori Response Action Plan \(health.govt.nz\)](https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/updated-covid-19-maori-response-action-plan)

<sup>28</sup> A range of examples of community-led initiatives during COVID-19 along with areas for action are outlined in ‘Shaping

the Future – Enabling Community-led Change. Inspiring Communities, New Zealand 2020.’ Retrieved from <https://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Shaping-The-Future.pdf>

initiative has been ‘achieved through Regional Leadership Groups, Regional Public Service Commissioners, and MSD Regional Commissioners working in partnership with community providers and leaders, iwi, Māori, Pacific peoples, ethnic communities, the disability sector, local councils, and government agencies’.<sup>29 30</sup>

It included a dedicated contact centre team to respond to referrals to support people’s needs and to those who required one-off assistance (eg, food packs). The service was supported by a regional and locally coordinated triage and response team to coordinate referrals to local services and providers as well as an online application channel and relationships with local community providers to ensure the effective

triage and delivery of support directly to whānau at home.

Whānau Ora Commissioning Agencies played an important role too. This included supporting whānau through ‘Whānau Ora direct’ and by distributing over 180,000 hygiene and ‘Whānau Ora packs’ by June 2020. The commissioning agencies continued to work to protect whānau from COVID-19, including through vaccinations as they became available.<sup>31</sup>

CiC received over 150,000 referrals for welfare and over half a million food parcels have been distributed through the initiative. A real-time evaluation found the initiative filled an important need for people in the community. An outcomes evaluation of the CiC is being undertaken and the findings will help to inform how an initiative of this nature

can be strengthened for the future. The evaluation is expected to be completed by the end of 2023.

## What challenged us?

### Funding across agencies and outcomes

Funding has been important to the COVID-19 response and recovery, enabling government agencies and communities to engage and to respond to individuals and families in need.<sup>32</sup>

However, rapid allocation of funding to community providers proved challenging and slower than anticipated. This impacted on the responsiveness of services initially.

One way to speed-up targeted funding allocation was to use existing agencies with close relationships with key providers.

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<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Social Development. Care in the Community welfare response: Lessons from a real-time evaluation. Retrieved from [www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/research/real-time-evaluation-of-the-care-in-the-community-welfare-response/real-time-evaluation-lessons-learned.pdf](http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/research/real-time-evaluation-of-the-care-in-the-community-welfare-response/real-time-evaluation-lessons-learned.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> See the COVID-19 Care in the Community Framework (August 2022) [www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/for-the-health-sector/covid-19-information-for-health-professionals/covid-19-information-for-all-health-professionals/caring-for-people-with-covid-19-in-the-community/](http://www.tewhatauora.govt.nz/for-the-health-sector/covid-19-information-for-health-professionals/covid-19-information-for-all-health-professionals/caring-for-people-with-covid-19-in-the-community/)

<sup>31</sup> Covid-19 Update: Whānau Ora Response – as at 9 June 2020 over 180,000 Whānau Ora Packs had been distributed to whānau in need. Retrieved from <https://whanauora.nz/assets/resources/WOCA-Weekly-Report-as-at-2020-06-07.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Examples of funding include: initiatives within the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund, Funding Māori and Pacific community services ; Strengthened engagement regime with Māori; Targeted support uptake of vaccinations by Māori; Funding to support NZ Māori Council to provide advice on monitoring the COVID-19 pandemic for Māori; Care in the

Community Disability Welfare Fund; and Ministry for Ethnic Communities COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake Fund.

Whānau Ora Commissioning Agencies, for example, were well placed in this regard.

Funding transfers from the Ministry of Health to Te Puni Kokiri enabled this mechanism to be quickly deployed to support whānau in need, through its established regional approach and whānau navigator model. In other cases, funding was deployed directly to providers, bypassing organising agents such as district health boards, for example.

An associated challenge, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic was ensuring a coordinated approach to funding providers across various funding streams. A funders forum is an approach used during the Cyclone Gabrielle response to help improve coordination and alignment of targeted funding.

The challenge of coordinating discrete funding lines between agencies speaks to a wider issue about how to best invest in improved outcomes. For example, bulk or

consolidated funding that is devolved can potentially help to unlock innovation and deliver better services tailored to communities needs. And this is something the Governance and Administration Select Committee has noted to Parliament as an important direction for government funded services.<sup>33</sup>

This direction is relevant to wider reforms being enabled by the Public Service Act, which increasingly focus on joining up to achieve shared outcomes. The Social Sector Commissioning Plan steps in this direction through relational-based funding approach coupled with longer contracts and greater integration of funding.<sup>34</sup>

This could potentially be further supported by funding reforms that provide greater flexibility for fund holders to meet local needs. However, such an approach would require those receiving bulk funding to deliver on outcomes and for the Public Service to take on greater risk. An over-riding

consideration is the degree to which the Public Finance Act is able to accommodate the flexibility needed while retaining accountability to Parliament for the use of public money.

### **Recognising when to step aside and let others take the lead**

It is important to acknowledge the Public Service is not always best placed to meet the needs of individuals and communities. And at times has been slow to step aside and let those who have trusted relationships with communities take the lead.



*The risks of both contracting COVID-19 and of severe illness and mortality reflect overlapping structural determinants of health that are bred by inequality and transmitted across generations.*

*Lancet | COVID-19 – break the cycle of inequality*

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<sup>33</sup> Report of the Governance and Administration Committee May 2023 - Public Service Commission, Briefing on state of the public service 2022 (page 5) <https://selectcommittees.parliament.nz/v/6/23f3e69c-ad4a-446f-87e8-08db4c1eb54d>

<sup>34</sup> The COVID-19 Māori Health Protection Plan identified that more permissive contracting arrangements, including multi-year contracts and guarantee funding for providers would help enable providers to focus on what they need to do to support whānau through the COVID-19 response (or other emergency

responses). Retrieved from [www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/13450\\_covid-19\\_action\\_plan\\_final\\_0.pdf](http://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/13450_covid-19_action_plan_final_0.pdf)

The findings from research and inquiries highlighted elevated health risks among different groups. And the need for the Public Service to do more and better sooner to support Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled people and other at-risk populations.<sup>35 36 37</sup>

This was evident in the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, for example, which relied strongly at the outset on delivery through established mainstream health settings, including general practice, pharmacies, and district health board-led clinics.<sup>38</sup>

This approach did not cater for all groups and contributed to key populations, including Māori, rural communities, and those aged over 65 years having lower vaccine uptake. Accessibility issues also created barriers for disabled people.

### COVID-19 vaccinations for Māori



#### Starting point

In September 2021, first dose vaccination rate was 43% for Māori vs 66% for the general population.

When the general population was projected to reach 90% (and open borders), the Māori rate was projected to be well below that level



#### The approach

Whānau-centred, locally led and nationally enabled

Rapid deployment of funding to promote Maori vaccinations and community resilience

System had access to an established mechanism in Whānau Ora



#### The results

By June 2022, first dose vaccination rates for Māori had increased to 91%

Validated that whanau-centred approaches can deliver where traditional approaches could not

Adjusting the approach over time, meant vaccine awareness and delivery was increasingly delivered through Kaupapa Māori providers, Pacific providers, and those with close connections to different ethnic communities and disabled people.<sup>39 40</sup>

For example, ‘By the community, for the community and with the community’ is the strategic approach that informed the Ministry for Ethnic Communities work on boosting vaccine rates across different population groups.

Funding directed towards Māori and Pacific centred approaches helped to increase vaccination rates significantly.

For example, the \$132 million Māori Communities COVID-19 Fund (October 2021 to 30 June 2022) played a role in mobilising

<sup>35</sup> Baker G, King P. (2022). Inquiry into the Support of Disabled People and Whānau During Omicron. Human Rights Commission, Ingram T, editors. Retrieved from <https://tikatangata.org.nz/news/inquiry-finds-omicron-response-put-disabled-people-at-risk>

<sup>36</sup> Waitangi Tribunal (2021). WAI 2575 Haumarū: The COVID-19 Priority Report. Retrieved from [Haumarū: The COVID-19 Priority Report – Pre-publication Version \(waitangitribunal.govt.nz\)](https://www.waitangitribunal.govt.nz/haumaru-the-covid-19-priority-report-pre-publication-version)

<sup>37</sup> Ministry of Health (2023). COVID-19 Risk Among Disabled People. Wellington: Ministry of Health. Retrieved from

[www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/covid-19-risk-among-disabled-people-15-mar.pdf](https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/covid-19-risk-among-disabled-people-15-mar.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Whitehead J, Atatoa Carr P, Scott N, R Lawrenson. Structural disadvantage for priority populations: the spatial inequity in distribution of COVID-19 vaccination services in Aotearoa. Retrieved from - <https://journal.nzma.org.nz/journal-articles/structural-disadvantage-for-priority-populations-the-spatial-inequity-of-covid-19-vaccination-services-in-aotearoa-open-access>

<sup>39</sup> Wehipeihana, N., Sebire, K. W., Spee, K. & Oakden, J. 2021. More than Just a Jab: Evaluation of the Māori influenza vaccination programme as part of the COVID-19 Māori health response. Wellington: Ministry of Health. Retrieved from [www.health.govt.nz/publication/more-just-jab-evaluation-maori-influenza-vaccination-programme-part-covid-19-maori-health-response](https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/more-just-jab-evaluation-maori-influenza-vaccination-programme-part-covid-19-maori-health-response)

<sup>40</sup> Ministry for Ethnic Communities. COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake Fund Final Report. <https://diaethniccommunities.cwp.govt.nz/assets/Resources/Covid19VaccineUptakeFundFinalReport.pdf>

and providing urgent funding support for rapid vaccination activities, to build resilience of vulnerable Māori communities and help hapori Māori to manage the impact of COVID-19. Since it was established, the Māori first dose vaccination rate increased from 69 percent to 91 percent and the second dose rate from 49 percent to 88 percent.<sup>41</sup>

Making data publicly available, essentially placing it in the hands of the community, was also valuable to improving responsiveness. When coupled with control over resources it enabled local efforts to be targeted to increase vaccine uptake and allowed for progress to be measured along the way.

The vaccine roll-out reinforces the old adage that ‘one size does not fit all’. And that the different approaches adopted by different groups proved to be important in lifting vaccination rates for priority populations and reducing inequities between different groups.

There is more to do to achieve equity and to improve service offerings that cater for

different needs and preferences. The insights unlocked through these tailored and community-led processes will be important for the Public Service to learn from and apply in the future.

This could be supported by greater freedom to fund across outcomes (noted earlier in paper). And could contribute to improving delivery and outcomes for groups the Public Service is not well equipped to reach.

### **Engaging the private sector in the response**

The private sector played an important role too. Many essential industries and workers came from the private sector and helped keep New Zealand running during lockdowns and beyond.

This included work at the border. Chief executives reflected that the more they understood how the border works for both government agencies and the private sector, the better and more workable the solutions and ultimately, they did ‘better together’.

The Public Service supported businesses and employees by rapidly implementing the Government’s wage subsidy scheme using a high-trust model. The prompt delivery of funding helped to cushion the economic impact of the pandemic. By June 2022, over \$19.4 billion in economic supports had been paid out to employers and self-employed people to help keep people in work during periods of elevated Alert Levels.<sup>42</sup>

New Zealand businesses operate at the cutting edge in a range of industries and sectors, including technology. The development of the COVID-19 tracing smartphone app is an example of technology that made it easier for people to trace their movements, isolate and stay safe.

However, on balance, the COVID-19 response could have benefited from earlier and greater input from the private sector in problem solving and developing solutions. And at times, the Public Service did not communicate well with the private sector.

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<sup>41</sup> Retrieved from [www.tpk.govt.nz/en/nga-putea-me-nga-ratonga/covid-19-information-for-maori/maori-communities-covid19-fund](http://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/nga-putea-me-nga-ratonga/covid-19-information-for-maori/maori-communities-covid19-fund)

<sup>42</sup> Ministry of Social Development | Annual Report 2021/22. Retrieved from - [www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/corporate/annual-report/2022/annual-report-2021-2022.pdf](http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/corporate/annual-report/2022/annual-report-2021-2022.pdf)



Looking ahead, we need to create space for the private sector to use their expertise, connections and innovation to benefit New Zealanders. This will ultimately mean New Zealand is better prepared and equipped to manage future pandemics and their impacts.

## What we're taking forward

### More engagement and partnering with communities to deliver services that work for them

Serving and protecting New Zealanders, including our most vulnerable citizens, has been at the centre of the COVID-19 response. While there is much to be proud of in the way public servants and others went about their work in trying circumstances. It is important to continue to address barriers to delivering effective public services, such as power imbalances, discrimination, silo-ism, and short-termism.<sup>43</sup>

We saw during the pandemic that officials were slower to use the strengths and connections within communities. And also

struggled at times to reach the people most in need and to deliver responsive and reliable services that are central to achieving better outcomes and fostering trust. We also saw that when the right conditions and support are available, a lot can be achieved.

Achieving equity in vaccination rates for Pacific peoples is an example of this, where Pacific providers and Pacific communities mobilised and vaccination increased significantly. The protection afforded by vaccination was important. Like Māori, Pacific peoples experience high rates of underlying health conditions that placed them at greater risk of COVID-19 related health complications (including hospitalisation). And higher mortality rates from COVID-19 than non-Pacific people.

Research has also highlighted that people receiving disability support services (DSS) were 13 times as likely to die due to COVID-19 compared with the general population.<sup>44</sup> Noting that DSS recipients are likely to have more complex needs, a medical condition

that puts them at greater risk, live with other people, and receive support that requires close contact with others.

More and better engagement with communities to understand their aspirations, needs and preferences will be important, not only for future pandemics, but in the delivery of day-to-day services, whether online or in person.



*The strongest risk factor for COVID-19 mortality is age, and this is consistent with what has been seen overseas. The risk of people dying was also strongly related to ethnicity with Māori and Pacific peoples having more than twice the risk of death compared with European and Other groups.*

*COVID-19 Mortality in Aotearoa New Zealand: Inequities in Risk (Ministry of Health 2022).*

<sup>43</sup> New Zealand Productivity Commission (2023). A fair chance for all: Breaking the cycle of persistent disadvantage. Retrieved from [www.productivity.govt.nz/publications/final-report-a-fair-chance-for-all/](https://www.productivity.govt.nz/publications/final-report-a-fair-chance-for-all/)

<sup>44</sup> Ministry of Health (2023). COVID-19 Risk Among Disabled People. Wellington: Ministry of Health. Retrieved from [www.health.govt.nz/publication/covid-19-risk-among-disabled-people](https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/covid-19-risk-among-disabled-people)

This is something that is being advanced through a range of work including active citizenship (noted earlier), through the Public Service increasing its capability to engage with Māori and understand Māori perspectives (with the support of Te Arawhiti), and through system leadership around service transformation and modernising its data and digital platforms.

The Government has also established Whaikaha | Ministry of Disabled People and Te Tari Mātāwaka | Ministry for Ethnic Communities, who alongside the Ministry of Pacific Peoples and Te Puni Kōkiri, encourage and create opportunities to engage and build relationships with people and help inform policy development, service design and implementation.

### **Embedding regional leadership**

Regional commissioners are an important part of the picture too. They focus on the planning and delivery of wellbeing outcomes in their regions, and ensure there is regional alignment and national level input where

needed to achieve outcomes for communities.

They also support the system and system leaders to work cohesively and credibly with local government, iwi, Māori organisations, NGOs and regional stakeholders.

Different regions are at different levels of maturity with regional leadership arrangements. Embedding this leadership is important, but will take time, ongoing funding and commitment to achieve its intended goals. This forms part of wider system leadership work.

### **Flexibility to tailor funding to meet needs**

It is important to ensure system settings enable service design and delivery to be adapted and reshaped to meet the needs of individuals and whānau.

And we need to acknowledge there are communities and groups the Public Service cannot deliver to. While at the same time recognising there are effective delivery mechanisms that can reach those

communities, and that those mechanisms are outside of the Public Service.

This is where partnership in a permissive commissioning environment will help enable needs to be met. But it means the Public Service needs to let go of power and take on more risk.

Some of this work is already underway across government. This includes adopting a relational approach to commissioning social services under the Social Sector Commissioning 2022–2028 Action Plan.<sup>45</sup> Work is also underway on strengthening whānau-centred and person-centred approaches, including Whānau Ora and transforming disability support services in

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<sup>45</sup> For further details see - [www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-](http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/planning-strategy/social-sector-commissioning/ssc-action-plan-2022.pdf)

[work/publications-resources/planning-strategy/social-sector-commissioning/ssc-action-plan-2022.pdf](http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/planning-strategy/social-sector-commissioning/ssc-action-plan-2022.pdf)

line with the Enabling Good Lives principles.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>47</sup>

Commissioning and contracting practices that enable flexibility and empower providers to innovate to meet needs are being also used to support the Cyclone Gabrielle recovery under the Social Services Response Plan.

Over time it is expected these initiatives and the direction they signal will help deliver more sustainable funding models, client and whānau-centred design and innovation. Coupled with longer term contracts, simplified contracting and procurement processes and partnering with Māori and other communities.

The degree to which these shifts can be fully realised within settings under the Public Finance Act, remains a live question. This is something the Treasury is considering. Any developments in this space will rightly be an important focus of the Office of the Auditor General too.

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<sup>46</sup> One example is Ngā Tini Whetū which is a whānau-centred early support prototype involving Te Puni Kōkiri, Oranga Tamariki and ACC designed to strengthen families and

improve the safety and wellbeing of children – retrieved from [www.tpk.govt.nz/en/nga-putea-me-nga-ratonga/whanau-ora/nga-tini-whetu-is-a-whanaucentred-early-support-pr](http://www.tpk.govt.nz/en/nga-putea-me-nga-ratonga/whanau-ora/nga-tini-whetu-is-a-whanaucentred-early-support-pr) and

[www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/about-us/research/our-research/nga-tini-whetu-lessons-learnt/](http://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/about-us/research/our-research/nga-tini-whetu-lessons-learnt/)

<sup>47</sup> See [www.whaikaha.govt.nz/about-us/enabling-good-lives/](http://www.whaikaha.govt.nz/about-us/enabling-good-lives/)

## **THEME 4 | Supporting our people**

Public servants have been at the forefront of the pandemic response and continue to be active in the recovery effort. Supporting our people and leaders through the pandemic has been an important focus and a learning opportunity for future pandemics.

### **What helped us**

#### **Courage, tenacity, and spirit of service**

Public servants were on the frontline of the COVID-19 response. And many worked long hours in the uncertain and changing environment that has characterised the pandemic.

The PSLT has been inspired by the many public servants who stepped up at a time of national crisis and demonstrated professionalism and a spirit of service to the community.

In the face of COVID-19 we saw our staff demonstrate tenacity and resilience. Frontline workers were courageous. Pre vaccine, they were tested regularly for symptoms, and were first to be vaccinated so they could deliver services to protect New Zealanders and promote wellbeing.

#### **Pivoting to flexible working, including working from home**

The elimination strategy adopted by the Government meant lockdowns and social distancing were important tools to limit and stamp out the spread of the virus in the community.

Work prior to the pandemic, to increase flexible working arrangements within the Public Service, enabled many agencies to pivot relatively quickly to working remotely.

<sup>48</sup> And increasingly adopt new ways of working, including online hui and hybrid working as Alert Levels changed and the traffic light framework was introduced.

This type of working is helping the public service to be increasingly agile and the ability

to work flexibility in time of crisis will continue to be an ongoing focus.

#### **Regular guidance to meet the changing situation**

As the pandemic situation changed guidance was developed for agencies and regularly updated and communicated. Guidance set out expectations of employers and workers in the context of different pandemic settings.

Guidance covered important matters such as leave, pay, vaccinations and keeping safe in the workplace. Agency heads of Human Resources across public sector workplaces played an important role by connecting and co-ordinating advice to their workforces and working with other stakeholders, including the Public Service Association and other unions.

### **What challenged us**

#### **Providing as much certainty for our people as possible at pace**

Preparing workforce guidance was a significant undertaking often done at pace, in

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<sup>48</sup> [Guidance: Flexible-Work-by-Default - Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission](#)

the wake of decisions taken by Ministers and Cabinet around changes to pandemic settings.

The short lead-in time (if any) for developing and communicating guidance placed pressure on agencies, unions and workforces. Preparing and implementing guidance was aided by constructive relationships between employers, workers and unions.

### **Stress and fatigue as the pandemic stretched on**

The intensity and duration of the pandemic took a toll on public servants. It was stressful and tiring.

Moving into the second year of COVID-19 it was clear that building greater resilience and sustainability into the system was necessary to ensure the public service system response was durable and sustainable.

Core COVID-19 agencies (Health, DPMC, MBIE, MFAT, Transport and Customs) were operating in seven day a week response

mode due to ongoing urgent requirements for policy advice, cross system co-ordination and operational delivery.

Awareness and concern about fatigue and possible burnout within these agencies were live issues. On top of COVID-19 response requirements, business as usual delivery added to demands on these chief executives and key personnel across their agencies.

### **What we're taking forward**

The pandemic has highlighted the commitment of public servants to serving their nation and communities in a time of crisis.

### **Recognising our people's spirit of service**

It's important to acknowledge that contribution. One expression of this is through the annual Te Hāpai Hapori | Spirit of Service Awards, where public servant's efforts are acknowledged and celebrated. The COVID-19 response has featured strongly in the awards in recent years.<sup>49 50</sup> And in

2022, as part of the annual Public Service Day Awards, 35 New Zealand Public Service Medals were conferred to exceptional public servants in recognition of their contribution to the response and recovery to COVID-19.

### **Supporting wellbeing**

It's also vital to maintain the wellbeing of staff during pandemics and emergencies. A heavy load was carried by some public servants in key roles and in high intensity areas of the response.

To provide targeted support for wellbeing and to mitigate risks in delivery a Key Role Alternate (KRA) model for the core COVID-19 chief executives was introduced in 2021. This involved Te Kawa Mataaho working directly with chief executives to identify dedicated, named back up for them in their roles so that they could take planned breaks and rest.

The KRA for each chief executive also needed to identify their own KRA, role modelling the approach through the agency. This initiative enabled senior leaders to take a break while

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<sup>49</sup> For more about the awards and past winners see [www.publicservice.govt.nz/role-and-purpose/spirit-of-service/spirit-of-service-awards/](http://www.publicservice.govt.nz/role-and-purpose/spirit-of-service/spirit-of-service-awards/)

<sup>50</sup> For more about the 'spirit of service to the community' in New Zealand's public service – see: Rodney Scott & Peter Hughes (2023) A spirit of service to the community: public service motivation in the New Zealand public service, *Asia*

*Pacific Journal of Public Administration*, 45:3, 238-243, retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/23276665.2023.2233644>

supporting business continuity. The KRA model now forms part of a suite of wellbeing and resilience tools for all Public Service chief executives.

### **Mobilising resources**

The Mobility Hub, discussed earlier in this paper, provides an important mechanism to identify capability and capacity gaps and to match people and resources to where they were needed.

The Hub is working alongside NEMA to develop a stronger system-wide approach to resourcing major national crises in New Zealand. This includes enhancements to the jobs.govt.nz functionality to create better visibility of short-term and secondment opportunities across the system, as well as the ability to capture a surge capacity workforce to respond to crises.

### **Developing our leaders**

It is also important to recognise that joined-up leadership does not only happen at the chief executive level. Te Pae Turuki | Public Service Leaders Group (PSLG) is a group of about 1,100 senior public servants who work together to provide strong, unified leadership across the Public Service. PSLG are integral to the future of the Public Service and helping to achieve a unified and join-up Public Service.

In July 2023, Te Rautaki Ārahi i te Ratonga Tūmatanui o Aotearoa | The Leadership Strategy for New Zealand's Public Service was released by the Commissioner.<sup>51</sup> The strategy gives effect to a special requirement in the Public Service Act to develop leadership across the Public Service.

It sets a vision for leadership and the leaders in PSLG (see box). And sets the path to achieve this vision, with a focus on:



**Te wawata | Our vision**

A responsive, inclusive, and unified team of leaders, collectively stewarding public services across agency and sector boundaries to better serve Aotearoa New Zealand and its people.

*We want to create one Te Pae Turuki Public Service Leaders Group, unified by a common mission and spirit of service, leading together on system priorities and modelling exemplary Public Service leadership.*

- building team spirit
- enhancing leaders' capability
- enabling leaders to respond with agility.

The strategy is designed to strengthen the position of leaders in PSLG to understand and respond to the known and unknown challenges ahead.

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<sup>51</sup> See [www.publicservice.govt.nz/assets/DirectoryFile/The-Leadership-Strategy-for-New-Zealands-Public-Service-July-2023.pdf](http://www.publicservice.govt.nz/assets/DirectoryFile/The-Leadership-Strategy-for-New-Zealands-Public-Service-July-2023.pdf)

Some of these challenges are unique to the Public Service in Aotearoa New Zealand, others are global challenges that all jurisdictions are facing, and some are inter-dependent.

Key priorities about what needs to be done over the next few years to bring the vision to life are set out in the strategy. The Commissioner with the Public Service Leadership Team are leading the strategy implementation.

Looking ahead, a workforce strategy for the Public Service will be prepared as a further step in implementing Public Service Act reforms. This presents opportunities to ensure the Public Service has the right capabilities, capacity, and agility to deliver on current and future needs, including in pandemic situations.

And that we continue to build diverse and inclusive workplaces that promote wellbeing and enable the spirit of service to thrive.