



19 August 2024

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Ref: OIA-2024/25-0020

Dear Wendy

Official Information Act request relating to COVID-19 Independent Advisory Groups

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received on 8 July 2024.

On the 18 and 22 July you sent through additional requests and on 29 July you agreed with staff in the Ministerial Services Team that we could combine all of your requests and answer them in a single response. For clarity an appendix is attached containing all of your requests that we have received.

Background

In December 2020 the COVID-19 Group (Group) was established as a business unit of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), continuing the work of the National Crisis Management Centre following the centre's deactivation on 30 June 2020. This Group was led by the Deputy Chief Executive COVID-19 All-of-Government Response (DCE COVID-19 Group).

The Group acted as a central COVID-19 response function responsible for oversight, integration and coordination across the response system as a whole. The Group was responsible for assurance to Ministers and the identification of opportunities for continuous improvement in New Zealand's response.

In June 2022, the DCE COVID-19 led an analysis of existing systems functions and governance structures with a view to transitioning the then centralised all-of-government response led by DPMC to a more orthodox governance and operating model. Over the course of 2022/23 the Group's functions were transferred to Te Whatu Ora (Health New Zealand) and Manatū Hauora (the Ministry of Health (MoH)), who are responsible for the ongoing coordination of the COVID-19 response.

The following links may be of use to you:

[Establishing a COVID-19 Response Unit \(Paper 2\) - March 2023 \(dpmc.govt.nz\)](#)

[Proactive release: Timeline of Aotearoa New Zealand's significant events and key All-of-Government activities - October 2023 - COVID-19 Group, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet \(dpmc.govt.nz\)](#)

As highlighted above, the COVID-19 response has transitioned out of DPMC, and this presents challenges in being able to respond to the detailed questions you have asked. Unfortunately, we no longer have the appropriate subject matter experts that can help clarify some of the questions you have raised. Deciding whether something is accurate or described appropriately for your book is not traditionally the purpose of the Official Information Act, which is used to access official information that is held by an agency for transparency and accountability.

You will also be aware that the response to the COVID-19 pandemic generated a significant volume of work that was happening at pace. This was particularly the case during the early days of the pandemic response. A search of our databases confirmed there are over 5,000 plus documents that relate to COVID-19 in some shape or form. The upper-limit of our search function in our document-management system is 5,000 documents so we can confirm there are at least 5,000 documents but it is likely that DPMC holds considerably more than 5,000 documents from over the years that we were coordinating for the pandemic response.

To be able to answer your questions to the detail asked would require a manual search and assessment of all of these documents. Accordingly, I am declining parts of your request under section 18(f) of the Act, that the information requested cannot be made available without substantial collation or research. In reaching this decision, I first considered the factors contained in sections 18A(1) and 18B of the Act. However, given the size of the task to locate information that may confirm the questions you have raised, I did not consider that taking any of these steps of charging you for the information, extending the time limits or consulting further with you, would allow the request to be answered.

However, working within the spirit of the Act, I recognise that although we are not able to provide the information to the level of detail you have requested, we can provide you with some information which I hope you find useful. This is set out in response to each of your questions where applicable.

COVID-19 Independent Advisory Group

This next portion covers multiple questions you have raised in relation to authors and dates relating to the COVID-19 Independent Advisory Group.

The COVID-19 Independent Advisory Group was established in March 2021 to provide independent advice on our ongoing COVID-19 response informed by their expertise in epidemiology, infectious diseases, public health and modelling. You can find out more about this group at the following link:

[COVID-19: Independent Advisory Groups | Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet \(DPMC\)](https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-01/Future-of-COVID-19-Independent-Advisory-Groups-19052022.pdf)

With regard to other advisory groups, our best available information is in the following table below. This is publicly available and much of this information you have already identified.

Group	Information that may be helpful
COVID-19 Independent Continuous Review, Improvement and Advice Group (CICRIAG)	Period: Mar 2021 – Jun 2022 Chair: Sir Brian Roche https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-01/Future-of-COVID-19-Independent-Advisory-Groups-19052022.pdf
Strategic COVID-19 Public Health Advisory Group (SPHAG)	Period: Mar 2021 – Dec 2022 Chair: Professor Sir David Skegg (Mar 2021 – Aug 2022) Chair: Professor Nikki Turner (September 2022 – Dec 2022) https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-01/Extension-of-the-Strategic-COVID-19-Public-Health-Advisory-Group-30062022.pdf https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-01/Future-of-COVID-19-Independent-Advisory-Groups-19052022.pdf

<p>COVID-19 Modelling Governance Group</p>	<p>Period: Feb 2021 – unknown Chair: Bryan Chapple (Treasury)</p> <p>https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-12/oia-20210519.pdf#page=5 Treasury OIA release contains a lot of information on this group, including its Terms of Reference and membership.</p> <p>https://edrms.hamlet.treasury.govt.nz/work/link/d/DPMC!4923798.1 Above email suggests the group was operating until at least March 2022.</p> <p>https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-01/DA07-27072021-COVID-19-Independent-Continuous-Review-Improvement-and-Advice-Group-Minutes.pdf#page=6</p> <p>There was also a COVID-19 Modelling Steering Group that comprised epidemiologists and expert modellers from the same agencies as the COVID-19 Modelling Governance Group (Treasury, DPMC, MoH, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, Stats NZ, and also Professor Shaun Hendy of Te Pūnaha Matatini). Information about this group is also included in that Treasury OIA release above.</p>
<p>Business Leaders' Forum ("Other")</p>	<p>Period: Mar 2021 – Mar 2022 Co-Chairs: Rob Fyfe and Kirk Hope</p> <p>(FYI: No Terms of Reference exist for this group)</p>
<p>Community Panel ("Other")</p>	<p>Period: Jul 2021 – Jun 2022 Chair: Sarah Sparks</p> <p>https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2022-12/30082022-covid-19-community-panel-chairs-report.pdf#page=11</p> <p>https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-01/Future-of-COVID-19-Independent-Advisory-Groups-19052022.pdf</p>

We understand that on 2 November 2020 a new role was announced in Cabinet – the Minister for COVID-19 Response. Can you provide the paper supporting that decision?

The Prime Minister of the day determines the title and scope of each portfolio, and also determines portfolio allocations (Cabinet Manual paras 2.7 and 2.8). They are not Cabinet decisions. Ministers are appointed to portfolios by the Governor-General, on the advice of the Prime Minister. The COVID-19 Response portfolio was established by the Prime Minister following the 2020 election and was included in the first Ministerial List of that administration. Hon Chris Hipkins was appointed to the portfolio by the Governor-General on 6 November 2020. Please find his Warrant of appointment **attached**. The Prime Minister's press release and associated Ministerial list can be found here: <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/new-cabinet-focused-covid-19-recovery>

When did Dr Ayesha Verrall become the Minister for COVID-19 Response? This was likely to be between May/June 2022 (via press releases), but we would prefer a date and a supporting document. A copy of the Cabinet paper would be ideal.

Dr Ayesha Verrall was appointed the Minister for COVID-19 Response on 14 June 2022. As explained in the previous answer, the Prime Minister determines portfolio allocations, not Cabinet. Please find Hon Dr Verrall's Warrant of appointment **attached**. The Prime Minister's press release can be found here: <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/cabinet-changes-following-faafoi-mallard-resignations>

When was the Minister for COVID-19 Response role disestablished? We assume that was early 2023 (by reviewing press releases), but we would prefer a date and a supporting document.

The COVID-19 Response portfolio was disestablished on 1 February 2023 when the Governor-General revoked the appointment of Hon Dr Verrall and no new appointment to the portfolio was made. A Gazette notice is **attached** as supporting documentation of this revocation. The new ministerial list announced on 31 January 2023 (which does not include the portfolio) can be found here: <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/default/files/Ministerial-list-announced-20-January-2023.pdf>

Can you confirm that the COVID-19 All-of-Government Response Group, is also known as the COVID-19 Group, and/or alternatively CARG? It would be great to clarify that they are all the same organisation.

I can confirm that DPMC's COVID-19 All-of-Government Response Group was also known as the COVID-19 Group. It was not known as CARG.

Information on the establishment and role of the COVID-19 All of Government Response Group / the COVID-19 Group is documented in Chapter 6 of the below report. <https://oag.parliament.nz/2022/covid-19>

Can you explain the difference between (a) the COVID-19 Group being managed by DPMC, but not being a business unit of DPMC, from 1 July 2020 to 2 December 2020 and (b) being a business unit of DPMC, from 2 December 2020? Is there a better way to describe (a) than we have done here?

Can you confirm if the dates in the table below are accurate and if possible, provide the disestablishment date of the COVID-19 Ministerial Group

We would appreciate more clarity over the mention of 'workstreams' in your timeline. Your timeline, 18 Mar 2020 mentions 'First National Action Plan issued and AoG workstreams initiated'(see here). What do these relate to? FYI: We note that the 2022 OAG report (here) mentions 'The Operations Command Centre had up to 28 workstreams. Some were set up in line with Pandemic Plan guidance, and others were created from scratch. Workstreams changed depending on what was needed.' Can you also name the 28 workstreams mentioned in the OAG report?

We have found an inconsistency, and wondered if you could shed any light on this. An historical version of your COVID-19 Group website reference (as at October 2020, see bottom para of first page 1 out of 4, see PDF here) stated that the COVID-19 Group was 'mandated [from 1 July 2020] to coordinate, and where necessary lead, the All-of-Government response to the ongoing pandemic'. However, the OAG report Co-ordination of the all-of-government response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (see page 52 here) states that 'Cabinet did not officially confirm the COVID-19 Group's role to co-ordinate and lead the response until December 2020.' Can you advise which is correct?

Was this because 2 December 2020 was the date that DPMC was formally funded to lead this work? I have included an image page (and quote) that we are hoping to describe the members of the Quin (see Attachment 2). Do you have any issues with this page and/or do you have a preferred photo of the five members (rather than the four members). Is the description appropriate?

Question 2: Firstly, are the two entries above correct?

Question 3: From memory, there was three stages; one was isolation if you had symptoms for selected groups of arrivals (the category system), the second must have been the removal of the category system (and related to all arrivals) and the third was isolation (even if you did not have symptoms). We have the first and the third, but when was the second, and can you provide a reference or a statement that we can use as evidence for the entry. In particular, can you provide a paper or an explanation as to the categories mentioned here: <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-03/cvd-20-min-0018-additional-Itemcovid-19-strengthening-border-measures.pdf> ? Can you advise what the categories were on 14 March and how they changed and when this category system was disestablished? For example, were they revoked/removed when the first COVID-19 Order on 9 April 2020 or with the passing of the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 on the 13 May 2020. Please explain the timeline in detail, and advise when the system was disestablished. We have not been able to find any explanation.

Question 4: Can you advise who are the members of the ‘all-of-government group’ in February and March? Should they be referred to as the ‘COVID-19 all-of-government group’. I noted that the early papers (e.g. before 1 April 2020), that ‘the Quin’ is not mentioned as author, but that the ‘all-of-government group’ is mentioned. See for example, this paper of 18 March 2020, found here <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-01/COVID-19 -All-of-Government-Plan-for-Maximising-Compliance-with-Self-Isolation.pdf>.

Question 5: Is there another group that needs to appear on our diagram, Figure 2.3, attached? What was the group called and when did they meet? I have attached the updated diagram to make clear what we are missing and want to understand.

Question 6: We would like to create a new entry for 5 March 2020. We note that three simulation exercises carried out to test response planning. Can you tell us more about this –who instigated it (was it Ministers?), who was involved (numbers and organisations), what was the nature of the exercise, how was it conducted, where was it held, what was the outcome and when it was carried out (e.g. over half-a-day).

Sorry about this but the editor also asked for the date of this diagram. I would assume 2 November 2020 (given it is sitting in the Briefing here – page 10). Can you let us know.

In relation to the ten questions above I refer you to our refusal under section 18(f) of the Act.

We note that DPMC is hosting the all-of-government function to co-ordinate input to the Royal Commission Inquiry (rather than DIA). Can you explain the reason for this? From our experience it is always DIA that administers and coordinates responses to Royal Commissions.

The Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) manages the Secretariat function for the Inquiry and supports the Commissioners. DPMC hosted an All-of-Government function during the Pandemic, and therefore has a significant role in the response. In addition to providing its own evidence, it is helping to co-ordinate the government’s response by providing liaison support to agencies to streamline communication and avoid duplication of evidence. This role is separate to that played by DIA, which as described above, hosts and services the Royal Commission of Inquiry.

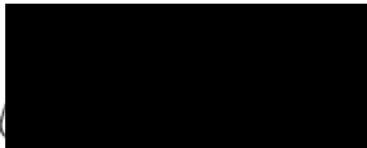
Please provide a copy or link to CAB-20-MIN-0106 (mentioned in <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-03/cvd-20-min-0018-additional-Itemcovid-19-strengthening-border-measures.pdf>)


On 6 August 2024 you were advised by staff in the Ministerial Services Team that this part of your request was transferred to the Ministry of Health to answer. As the owner of the Cabinet paper, it is appropriate that MoH releases it. Whilst DPMC hosts the Cabinet Office, DPMC cannot release information which it does not own. We are obligated under the Act to transfer requests in part or full if we know the information requested is owned by another agency or department.

You have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate and review my decision under section 28(3) of the Act.

This response will be published on the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's website during our regular publication cycle. Typically, information is released monthly, or as otherwise determined. Your personal information including name and contact details will be removed for publication.

Yours sincerely

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**Executive Director
Strategy, Governance and Engagement**