

Hon Chris Hipkins

MP for Remutaka

Minister for COVID-19 Response

Minister of Education

Minister for the Public Service

Leader of the House



07 July 2021

Brook Barrington

Chief Executive

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

Peter Hughes

Public Service Commissioner

Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission

Dr Ashley Bloomfield

Director-General

Ministry of Health

Carolyn Tremain

Chief Executive

Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment

Dear Public Service COVID-19 Response Leaders

Response to Lessons Learned from the February COVID-19 Outbreak Response

I want to thank everyone for your work to date on the COVID-19 response and your commitment to continuous improvement across the response system. It is encouraging to see the system continuing to build on from the lessons of previous responses, particularly in the in the context of the emergence of new variants and the additional challenges that they present to the COVID-19 response.

In response to the letter from the Chair of the COVID-19 Independent Continuous Review, Improvement and Advice Group (CRIAG), I want recognise the work done so far on lessons learned from the February outbreak response.

I acknowledge the Chair's view about fatigue across a pandemic response system which has been operating, and iterating, at pace for over a year. I have expressed similar concerns to the Public Service Commissioner. I have been assured that there is significant focus on the rostering of officials to build resilience into the system, both to avoid single points of failure with key roles and to support people's wellbeing. Nonetheless, given the pace and ongoing nature of the response, tiredness will continue to be an issue. You will be addressing that within each of your organisations but do let me know where fatigue presents a risk to the response or where we can take action at the system level to address it.

The CRIAG has recommended that we conduct a stocktake of the various reviews that have taken place across the COVID-19 response system in order to support continuous improvement by ensuring that recommendations made have been actioned or otherwise addressed. I agree and have asked DPMC's COVID-19 Response Group to lead this work. Although I know that most recommendations will have already been addressed or else are superseded, it will be useful to be updated on progress against those not yet closed. Progress against review recommendations, including the lessons learned from the February outbreak response, will be reported to me by the mid July and monthly thereafter.

In response to the February Outbreak Review, several of these key recommendations have been raised in previous reviews and I would like to see focused progress in tranches.

The first three workstreams I want to see progress on, and which will be publicly reported on are: progress already made with contact tracing; system capacity and capability; and system-wide scenario planning. I expect to see an agreed work plan which address these workstream priorities on the Unite Against COVID-19 website by 13 July 2021. Noting the complexities involved in scenario planning in the context of quarantine-free travel arrangements, I would like to expand this workstream to incorporate further work on a possible Cook Islands COVID-19 response. My Office will help to coordinate the scope and timeframe of this work.

The Chair's letter notes that former Technical Advisory Group (TAG) has been disbanded. I have been advised that TAG is now convened only when new science developments become available and require input or recommendations. But I agree with the Chair that we must involve more external stakeholders to give proactive and early feedback on any operating model enhancements. This could operate in the same way as the external engagement processes used in the vaccine programme.

Looking ahead, I judge that the CRIAG's expertise would be best utilised by providing real-time advice, meeting fortnightly together and inviting other agencies as required. I would like the focus of the Group to be on capturing lessons and identifying possible innovations to inform the evolution of a fit-for-future COVID-19 prevention and response system. These independent insights should be reported back to me regularly, shared with agencies, and published on the COVID-19 website.

I understand that the Chair and the CRIAG secretariat have met with you and discussed working effectively across the next stages of the Group's work programme. I expect that work on this will continue at pace and as a priority alongside the Government's work on Reconnecting New Zealand, and as such will extend to other parts of the COVID-19 response system, including MIQ and the Border Executive Board.

I want to again extend my sincere thanks to everyone for their incredibly hard work that has kept New Zealanders safe. It is important that the response is future-looking and evolves to the new challenges that will arise through the next phase of the pandemic response.

Yours sincerely



Chris Hipkins
Minister for COVID-19 Response

CC

Sir Brian Roche
Chair
COVID-19 Independent Continuous Review, Improvement and Advice Group

Christine Stevenson
Chair
Border Executive Board

Cheryl Barnes
Deputy Chief Executive, COVID-19 Response Group
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet