



15 March 2023



Ref: OIA-2022/23-0595

Dear

Official Information Act request relating to Impact of mask mandates on decreasing infections and hospitalisations

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) requests which were transferred from the Ministry of Health on 17 and 27 February 2023 to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC). This response will cover both requests, and includes information held by the Ministry of Health.

You requested:

17 February 2023

I'm interested in how mask mandate decision points worked - mandates were at times partial (eg just public transport) to more encompassing (eg if in an indoor space as was the case at the time of the above briefing). The above I quoted shows modelling as an example used to demonstrate the impact of mask mandates, but I'd like any available information that was developed or discussed that showed what metrics were being used to actually track mask mandates and their actual impact on decreasing infections and hospitalisations. If any information exists, even if it wasn't used (for instance discussions or commentary on ways it could be tracked) could I please include that in this request.

In the above example that I quoted, I would expect to see as part of this request, anything that was implemented or attempted to discover if there was in fact a rise in infections and hospitalisation post the mandates dropping in September?"

27 February 2023

"Modelling provided after the PHRA suggests that removing mask mandates and quarantine requirements for household contacts at the same time could increase infections and hospitalisations by 50-55 percent in the short-term, compared with only a 22-25 percent increase if household quarantine were removed and mask mandates were maintained."

- Does any information or commentary or discussion exist that shows what was the result of the removal of mask mandates shortly after this briefing outside of health care facilities - did it show that infections and hospitalisations rose?

- Also for across the 2022 year, what metrics were in use to monitor how mask mandates were successfully slowing the spread within New Zealand (they were regularly reviewed prior to being dropped so what was being collected to ensure they were working is my key query).

On 28 February you clarified with the DPMC to exclude modelling and to provide actuals.

I can advise that DPMC was responsible for providing integrated strategy and policy advice on the response to COVID-19 from an all of government point of view.

The modelling referred to in your request was developed by COVID-19 Modelling Aotearoa. Outside of modelling, it is difficult to isolate the impact of masks on transmission as it is driven by many interacting factors, including interactions with other mandates and voluntary behaviours. Modelling provides the closest approximation.

The impact or success of masks in reducing transmission, at a high level, is made up of a combination of compliance and efficacy. DPMC and MoH monitor compliance with mask mandates to inform public health settings. We have provided links below to the survey results that demonstrate monitoring of compliance

DPMC supplemented modelling information with public surveys that assess the impact of public health measures. We have provided survey results which measure compliance, again noting that you have ruled out modelling as out of scope. Included below are some links to this information that may be of interest to you:

Document	Most relevant pages
Behaviour & Sentiment July 22 Update	20, 21, 22, 23
Behaviour & Sentiment May 22 Update	21, 22
Behaviour & Sentiment March 22 Update	34, 35, 36
Behaviour & Sentiment January 22 Update	18, 19, 20
Research Unite against COVID-19 (covid19.govt.nz)	

More information on how modelling was created, including where assumptions have been made, is linked below:

<https://www.covid19modelling.ac.nz/>

I have also included an overview of how advice was developed for Ministers to inform their decision-making process on the appropriate mask mandate settings for Aotearoa New Zealand.

1. ***How did the mask mandate decision points work?*** (from request #1)
2. ***For across the 2022 year, what metrics were in use to monitor how mask mandates were successfully slowing the spread within New Zealand (they were regularly reviewed prior to being dropped so what was being collected to ensure they were working is my key query)*** (from request #2)

The table below details the steps that were used to make decisions in relation to mask mandates.

Step 1: Development of public health	Under section 14(5) of the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act ('the Act'), the Minister is required to keep COVID-19 orders under review. To support this, Manatū Hauora provides regular public health advice in
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<p>advice</p>	<p>relation to orders. This advice considered whether masks were still appropriate for the nature of the risk and made a recommendation accordingly.</p> <p>When the COVID-19 Protection Framework (CPF) was in force (from December 2021 to September 2022), the CPF colour setting determined if and where masks were mandatory. Manatū Hauora carried out regular public health risk assessments to review which colour setting the country was at, and sometimes reviewed the components of the colour settings themselves. Following each assessment, the Director-General of Health provided public health advice to the Minister of Health.</p> <p>Following removal of the CPF in September 2022, regular public health risk assessments continued to be held in relation to the remaining mandatory measures.</p> <p>Public health advice provided in 2022 following these risk assessments has been proactively released (see attachment group 4). Some of these documents refer to surveys undertaken by DPMC (see attachment group 1) or Manatū Hauora (see attachment group 2).</p>
<p>Step 2: Consultation with other agencies and development of Cabinet paper</p>	<p>DPMC then consulted with other government agencies and produced a Cabinet paper or briefing note summarising both the public health advice and feedback from other agencies. This advice took into account the following non-health factors: impacts on at-risk populations and iwi Māori, economic impacts, public attitudes and compliance, and operational considerations.</p>
<p>Step 3: Decision-making criteria and process</p>	<p>The decision in relation to orders sits with the responsible Minister - currently the Minister of Health. Previously this was the Minister for COVID-19 Response.</p> <p>The factors that the Minister must and may consider in making these decisions are specified in section 9 of the Act.</p> <p>9 Requirements for making COVID-19 orders under section 11</p> <p>(1) The Minister may make a COVID-19 order under section 11 in accordance with the following provisions:</p> <p>(a) the Minister must have had regard to advice from the Director-General about—</p> <p>(i) the risks of the outbreak or spread of COVID-19; and</p> <p>(ii) the nature and extent of measures (whether voluntary or enforceable) that are appropriate to address those risks; and</p> <p>(b) the Minister may have had regard to any decision by the Government on the level of public health measures appropriate to respond to those risks and avoid, mitigate, or remedy the effects of the outbreak or spread of COVID-19 (which decision may have taken into account any social, economic, or other factors); and</p> <p>(ba) the Minister must be satisfied that the order does not limit or is a justified limit on the rights and freedoms in the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990; and</p> <p>(c) the Minister—</p> <p>(i) must have consulted the Prime Minister, the Minister of Justice, and the Minister of Health; and</p> <p>(ii) may have consulted any other Minister that the Minister (as defined in this Act) thinks fit; and</p> <p>(d) before making the order, the Minister must be satisfied that the order is appropriate to achieve the purpose of this Act.</p> <p>(2) Nothing in this section requires the Minister to receive specific advice from the Director-General about the content of a proposed order or proposal to amend, extend, or revoke an order.</p> <p>To date, the Minister has elected to use the Cabinet process as a mechanism to consult with colleagues. This is permitted under section 9(1)(c)(ii) of the Act.</p>

	<p>Under sections 9(1)(a) and 9(2), the Minister is not required to follow public health advice, but he or she must have regard to such advice if it is provided.</p> <p>Cabinet papers relating to mandatory measures have been proactively released (see attachment group 5).</p>
Step 4: Requirements for orders to be in place	<p>Under section 8 of the Act, any order must meet one of the three pre-requisites below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • while an epidemic notice under section 5 of the Epidemic Preparedness Act 2006 is in force for COVID-19; or • while a state of emergency or transition period in respect of COVID-19 under the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002 is in force; or • if the Prime Minister, by notice in the <i>Gazette</i>, after being satisfied that there is a risk of an outbreak or the spread of COVID-19, has authorised the use of COVID-19 orders (either generally or specifically) and the authorisation is in force. <p>An epidemic notice was in force until October 2022. Since then, a series of prime ministerial authorisations have been in place. Crown Law has produced advice on the specific tests that must be met for section 8(c) to be met.</p>

3. I'd like any available information that was developed or discussed to show the metrics that were being used to track mask mandates and their impact on decreasing infections and hospitalisations? (from request 1)

Adherence to mask mandates would have been considered as part of the process described above.

For **mask adherence**, there were two key sources of data:

- Survey series commissioned by DPMC (TRA) – contained time series data showing people's reported adherence, perceptions of others' adherence, and intention to adhere (**see attachment group 1**).
- Surveys commissioned by Manatū Hauora (Horizon Research) – several of the reports released in 2022 contained questions on mask use (**see attachment group 2**).

Estimates of the impact of removing mask mandates were carried out as part of the modelling that DPMC commissioned Covid-19 Modelling Aotearoa (CMA) to carry out. At times these estimates combined the effect of possible mask changes with the effect of making other changes.

For the **efficacy of masks, and mask mandates**, there is a significant body of literature showing the benefits of these measures to reduce risk of transmission. Manatū Hauora provided a report to the Minister in August 2022 with a summary of the evidence base (**see attachment 3**). The evidence base was also referred to in earlier PHRA memos.

For the **impact of mask mandates**, it is reasonable to conclude that mask mandates were having a positive impact on the outbreak for the period they were in place. However, as with other public health measures, it is challenging to accurately assess the contribution of one measure against another.

- 4. If any information exists, even if it wasn't used (for instance discussions or commentary on ways it could be tracked) could I please include that in this request** (from request #1)

Manatū Hauora does not have any record of the possibility of objectively tracking mask mandate adherence being discussed or considered.

- 5. Was anything implemented or attempted to discover if there was in fact a rise in infections and hospitalisation post the mandates dropping in September?** (from request #1)
- 6. Does any information or commentary or discussion exist that shows what was the result of the removal of mask mandates shortly after this briefing outside of health care facilities - did it show that infections and hospitalisations rose?** (from request #2)

This question was briefly covered in the 26 January 2023 PHRA memo (**see attachment 4(I)**).

Attachments

Group number	Group	Documents												
1	DPMC survey series	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Document</th> <th>Most relevant pages</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>(a) Behaviour & Sentiment July 22 Update</td> <td>20, 21, 22, 23</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(b) Behaviour & Sentiment May 22 Update</td> <td>21, 22</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(c) Behaviour & Sentiment March 22 Update</td> <td>34, 35, 36</td> </tr> <tr> <td>(d) Behaviour & Sentiment January 22 Update</td> <td>18, 19, 20</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Research Unite against COVID-19 (covid19.govt.nz)</td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Document	Most relevant pages	(a) Behaviour & Sentiment July 22 Update	20, 21, 22, 23	(b) Behaviour & Sentiment May 22 Update	21, 22	(c) Behaviour & Sentiment March 22 Update	34, 35, 36	(d) Behaviour & Sentiment January 22 Update	18, 19, 20	Research Unite against COVID-19 (covid19.govt.nz)	
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2	National and population survey reports commissioned by Manatū Hauora (Horizon Research) ¹	<p>Refused under section 18(d) as the information requested is publicly available at:</p> <p>(a) Attitudes and behaviours to COVID-19 protection measures in the post-Omicron peak, prewinter context (June 2022 report, in the field 26-30 May 2022)²</p>												

¹ <https://www.health.govt.nz/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-data-and-statistics/evaluation-and-behavioural-science>

		<p>(b) Equitable access to COVID-19 healthcare (July 2022 report, in the field 27 June – 4 July 2022)³</p> <p>(c) Behavioural surveillance survey (October 2022 report, in the field 15-20 September 2022)⁴</p> <p>(d) Behavioural surveillance 2 survey (November 2022 report, in the field 31 Oct – 7 Nov 2022)⁵</p>
3	Review of the public health value of mask mandates (HR20221311)	Withheld on the grounds that the information requested is or will soon be publicly available – section 18(d) of the Official Information Act 1982.
4	Public Health Risk Assessments	<p>Some of the Public Health Risk Assessments detailed below have been proactively released. Links have been provided where this is the case. Those Public Health Risk Assessments that have not yet been proactively released are declined under section 18(d) of the Act because the information will soon be available on Manatū Hauora’s website: https://www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases</p> <p>(a) Feb 2022 COVID-19 Assessment Committee memo</p> <p>(b) 29 March 2022 COVID-19 Assessment Committee memo</p> <p>(c) 11 April 2022 COVID-19 Assessment Committee memo</p> <p>(d) 16 May COVID-19 Assessment Committee memo</p> <p>(e) Review of the COVID-19 Protection Framework settings and isolation periods – 15 June 2022⁶</p> <p>(f) Public health risk assessment of 14 July 2022</p> <p>(g) Public health risk assessment of 27 July 2022</p> <p>(h) Public health risk assessment of 3 October 2022</p> <p>(i) Public health risk assessment of 7 November 2022</p> <p>(j) Public health risk assessment of 26 January 2023 – paragraph 36</p> <p>Three PHRA memos have previously been proactively released:</p> <p>(k) Review of the COVID-19 Protection Framework settings and isolation periods – 15 June 2022⁷</p>

²https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/june_2022_report_attitudes_and_behaviours_to_covid-19_protection_measures_in_the_post-omicron_peak_prewinter_context.pdf

³ https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/july_2022_report_equitable_access_to_covid-19_healthcare_.pdf

⁴ https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/october_2022_report_behavioural_surveillance_1.pdf

⁵ https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/december_2022_report_behavioural_surveillance_2.pdf

		(l) Public health risk assessment of 17 August 2022 ⁸ (m) Public health risk assessment of 22 November 2022 ⁹
5	Cabinet papers on COVID-19 settings	https://dpmc.govt.nz/publications
	Misc	https://covid19.govt.nz/assets/Proactive-Releases/Alert-levels-and-restrictions/10-Aug-2022/Face-Coverings-Further-Advice-on-Policy-Changes-at-Red.pdf https://covid19.govt.nz/assets/Proactive-Releases/Alert-levels-and-restrictions/10-Aug-2022/Further-Advice-regarding-Face-Mask-Policy-Changes-at-Red.pdf https://covid19.govt.nz/assets/Proactive-Releases/Alert-levels-and-restrictions/3-Aug-2022/COVID-19-Response-4-April-2022-Review-of-COVID-19-Protection-Framework-Colour-Setting.pdf

In making my decision, I have taken the public interest considerations in section 9(1) of the Act into account.

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

This response may 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



Katrina Casey
Deputy Chief Executive COVID-19 Group

⁷ <https://covid19.govt.nz/assets/Proactive-Releases/Alert-levels-and-restrictions/proactive-release-2022-september/Review-of-New-Zealands-COVID-19-Protection-Framework-and-self-isolation-settings-22-June-2022.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/general-information-releases/information-associated-decisions-new-approach-managing-covid-19>

⁹ <https://dpmc.govt.nz/publications/proactive-release-covid-19-measures-summer>