



22 March 2023

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Ref: OIA-2022/23-0617

Dear [REDACTED]

**Official Information Act request about the Government's response to COVID-19 disinformation**

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (OIA) request of 31 January 2023.

You have requested:

*“Can you please provide information on whether a counter-disinformation, or similar, ability was stood up during the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

*And, if such an ability was stood up, the details of:*

- The date the decision was made to have this ability*
- Who made the decision to have this ability*
- The government agencies involved in providing this ability*
- Any terms of reference created, under which the ability was to operate*
- Which government department or agency was the lead agency for this ability*
- The total cost of creating and maintaining this ability*
- Whether this ability remains in place, in any form, within a government department or agency.”*

The time frame for responding to your request was extended under section 15A of the OIA by 20 working days because consultation was needed before a decision could be made on the request. Following this extension, I am now in a position to respond.

It was identified in late 2020 that disinformation was an emerging risk to the COVID-19 response both in New Zealand and globally. Individual agencies are responsible for addressing misinformation and disinformation issues that relate to their specific portfolio areas. Please note that we can only respond on behalf of information held by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC).

DPMC did not establish a counter-disinformation function. However, during 2021 the COVID-19 Group within DPMC set up a Strategic Communications function. They were tasked with ensuring credible information was available to the public and developing a strategic communications approach to addressing misinformation and disinformation. This was funded from within the COVID-19 All of Government Response appropriation. More information regarding the costs is available within the Annual Report 2021/22:

<https://dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2022-10/dpmc-annual-report-2022.pdf>

DPMC also chaired a fortnightly interagency meeting to support the coordination across agencies regarding the misinformation and disinformation landscape. It included situational awareness policy and cross-agency collaboration. The group started meeting on 23 September 2021. It was an informal round table catch up to share issues and ideas. Attendees have included representatives from the Ministries of Health, Education and Foreign Affairs and Trade, as well as the Department of Internal Affairs.

Only an early draft terms of reference for the group exists. I have decided to withhold this document in full under section 9(2)(g)(i) of the OIA, to maintain the effective conduct of public affairs through the free and frank expression of opinion.

There is ongoing policy work within DPMC in relation to responding to misinformation and disinformation, including within the COVID-19 landscape. This work will be primarily driven from outside government by a wide range of institutions, such as civil society organisations, academia and media, to build capability and contribute to a whole of society approach.

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

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

This response may be published on the DPMC 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



Clare Ward  
**Executive Director**  
**Strategy, Governance and Engagement**