



31 March 2021



Reference: OIA-2020/21-0413

Official Information Act request relating to ODESC and Watch Group meetings

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) on 4 March 2021. You requested:

“...Can I please have a detailed breakdown of the number of ODESC meetings since 2019.

Please explain when the meetings took place and the topic(s) discussed.

Please also detail the number of Watch Groups that met since 2019.

Please explain when the meetings took place and the topic(s) discussed.

And I ask that anything within the spirit of this request that is not mentioned be included in the response...”

By way of background, I would begin by noting that the Officials Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination (ODESC) meet with a focus on the National Security System, during an emerging or actual security event. As you may be aware, members of ODESC take advice from Watch Groups, which are formed in response to a potential, emerging, or actual event and are comprised of senior officials from relevant agencies. Further information about Watch Groups can be found online at: <https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/national-security-and-intelligence/new-zealands-national-security-system-during-a-crisis/governance-during-crisis/watch-groups>; further information about ODESC can be found online at: <https://dpmc.govt.nz/our-programmes/national-security-and-intelligence/new-zealands-national-security-system-during-a-crisis/governance-during-crisis/odesc>.

When the need for ODESC meetings and/or Watch Groups is identified, the National Security System is activated to provide whole-of-government decision-making support for agencies and Ministers. Given the sensitive nature of the National Security System, I have decided to withhold details about these meetings, including meeting dates and specific meeting topic/s under section 6(a) of the Act, to protect the security or defence of New Zealand or the international relations of the Government of New Zealand. I am, however, able to provide you with a broad outline of the information you requested as outlined below.

In the 2019 calendar year the National Security System was activated for 21 ODESC meetings and 45 Watch Groups. A wide range of issues prompted activation of the system, including biosecurity concerns, National Security System resilience, cyber incidents, New Zealanders in Syria, the security of upcoming major events (both within New Zealand and overseas), and humanitarian assistance to the Pacific. The system was also activated in response to the Whakaari/White Island volcanic eruption and the terrorist attack on Christchurch masjidain.

In the 2020 calendar year the National Security System was activated for 14 ODESC meetings and 17 Watch Groups. Issues which prompted activation of the system included cyber incidents, humanitarian assistance to the Pacific, New Zealanders in Syria, and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Six Watch Groups had been held in 2021 by the time your request was received. No ODESC meetings had occurred. Issues that prompted activation include cyber security incidents, as well as New Zealanders in Syria.

For awareness, it may be helpful to note that statistics relating to the National Security System, including the number of ODESC and Watch Group meetings, are published in DPMC's Annual Reports at <https://dpmc.govt.nz/publications>. In considering the statistics in these reports, I would note that the date range in these publications is by financial year rather than calendar year. I anticipate data for the 2020/2021 financial year will be similarly published in due course.

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 DPMC'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



Tony Lynch
**Deputy Chief Executive
National Security Group**