



13 September 2021

Ref: OIA-2021/22-0161

Official Information Act request regarding the cost of lockdowns

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received on 18 August 2021. Your request stated:

"I don't think our government is making evidence-based decisions where it pertains to managing SARS-CoV-2 using lockdowns.

There is mounting evidence that suggests that the cost of lockdowns is 5 to 10 times higher in terms of wellbeing years when compared to taking no action. I have attached evidence of this claim.

I would like to know what EVIDENCE (with peer-reviewed, primary sources) your group and our government is using to justify its recent action in locking the nation down over ONE case.

I would like to advise you that I have reviewed your website, the WHO, CDC, and a number of other 'reputable' agencies. The evidence does not add up. As a result, I would appreciate it if you could hand me the 'needle' and not the 'haystack'.

I would appreciate your help on the matter and look forward to your response, thank you."

The decision to move the country to Alert Level 4 on 17 August 2021 was in accordance with the government's COVID-19 elimination strategy. It is consistent with a body of evidence (including the impacts of earlier response decisions) which indicates that swift and stringent restrictions can domestically eliminate COVID-19.

I acknowledge that higher Alert Levels create significant burdens for New Zealanders. However, our experiences over the course of the pandemic to date demonstrate that this approach delivers better economic and social outcomes for New Zealanders, on average, over the course of the pandemic to date. The *Oxford Stringency Index* represents how New Zealand has consistently had some of the lowest government restrictions of all countries, as well as having very few cases of COVID-19.

This is qualitatively different to the discussion of lockdowns outlined in the article you have attached to your request. It is more applicable to the many countries around the world that have not achieved a state of elimination, but have, nevertheless, had to endure long periods with significant and wide-reaching public health interventions.

Some important parts of the evidence base supporting New Zealand's strategy are discussed across the following locations.

Date	Document Title	Website Address
Submitted 10 June 2021, Published 11 August 2021	The Strategic COVID-19 Public Health Advisory Group's Advice to Minister Verrall	https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-levels-and-updates/independent-advisory-groups/scphag
Various	The Treasury's Staff Insights Blog <i>In particular, see:</i> - "WEU Special Topic - Alert Level Assumptions Refresh (BEFU 2021)", published 23 April 2021; and - "Economic advice in a time of COVID: How the New Zealand Treasury navigated the uncertainty of the global pandemic", published 5 February 2021	https://www.treasury.govt.nz/publications/research-and-commentary/staff-insights-blog/search?start-date-quarter=default&start-date-year=default&end-date-quarter=default&end-date-year=default&page=1
22 December 20	Response to letter from Sundborn et al. on: 'Chasing elimination through lockdowns is stamping out livelihoods and lives'	https://www.publish.csiro.au/hc/Fulltext/HC15959
13 August 2020	New Zealand's COVID-19 elimination strategy <i>Michael G Baker, Amanda Kvalsvig, Ayesha J Verrall</i>	https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.5694/mja2.50735
Updated daily	Oxford Stringency Index	https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/covid-stringency-index

In order to implement the strategy, responding swiftly and decisively to new cases is essential. At the start of the August 2021 outbreak the initial decisions to implement Alert Level 4 were not simply made in response to a single case being identified, but to the wider transmission that the initial case was suggestive of, and what delaying a response could mean.

On 17 August 2021 at the 6pm press conference, Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield said:

"Importantly, and this has been fundamental to our advice to the Government, at this point there is no obvious link between this case and the border."

And:

"this case was identified in Auckland, but it is a national issue. Because we cannot link the case to the border at this point, it is possible there are other cases around in Auckland and other possible chains of transmission. People from around the country will have travelled to Auckland and back to other parts of New Zealand. Therefore, whilst it's a case identified in Auckland, it requires us all to be part of the response."

At the same press conference, the Prime Minister stated :

"We have made decisions on the basis that it is better to start high and go down levels rather than start too low, not contain the virus, and see it move quickly. We've seen the dire consequences of taking too long to act in other countries, not least our neighbours."

In accordance with the government's strategy, swift and decisive initial response decisions are necessary because of the likelihood of additional undetected cases, and because any delays to a response allow the virus greater opportunity to spread exponentially. In turn, this is likely to lengthen the period during which restrictions are necessary and reduce the chance of successful elimination.


As with each of the Alert Level decisions taken to date, you can review the information provided to Cabinet to inform their decision when the papers are proactively released on the United Against COVID-19 website:

<https://dpmc.govt.nz/publications/proactive-release-package-dpmc-202021-597>.

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



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