**DEPARTMENT** OF THE
**PRIME MINISTER** AND **CABINET**
TE TARI O TE PIRIMIA ME TE KOMITI MATUA

13 December 2021

[redacted]

Ref: OIA-2021/22-0441

Dear [redacted]

**Official Information Act request relating to surveys of public perception of COVID-19 Response**

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received on 15 October 2021. You requested:

> *I refer you to: www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/politics/covid-19-delta-outbreak-the-government-knows-how-aucklanders-feel-about-lockdown-it-should-publish-its-data/3PEOZUPN7FQWKUBSDUWS3EJICI/*
>
> *There is reference to "surveys of how the public feel about the Covid-19 response" and one that was conducted in September this year.*
>
> Under the OIA I request that survey and the results please, and any covering memo/briefing material prepared alongside the survey and the results.

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

I have decided to release the October 2021 briefing *COVID-19 Sentiment and Behaviour Research July - September*. Some information is withheld from the document under section 9(2)(a) of the Act, to protect the privacy of individuals.

Both the July and September survey results have recently been proactively released on the Unite against COVID-19 website (see: COVID19.govt.nz/about-our-covid-19-response/proactive-releases). You can find these reports under the Research tab. Accordingly, I have refused this part of your request under section 18(d) of the Act, as the information requested will soon be publicly available.

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.



Executive Wing, Parliament Buildings, Wellington, New Zealand 6011
64 4 817 9698 www.dpmc.govt.nz

This response will 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

Cheryl Barnes
**Deputy Chief Executive,**
**COVID-19 Group**

DEPARTMENT OF THE PRIME MINISTER AND CABINET
TE TARI O TE PIRIMIA ME TE KOMITI MATUA

# Briefing

## COVID-19 SENTIMENT AND BEHAVIOUR RESEARCH JULY- SEPTEMBER

| To: Hon Chris Hipkins<br>Minister for COVID-19 Response | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Date** | 11/10/2021 | **Priority** | Medium |
| **Deadline** | 15/10/2021 | **Briefing Number** | DPMC-2021/22-461 |

## Purpose

The purpose of this briefing is to provide an overview of recent research into public sentiment and behaviours in relation to COVID-19 and demonstrate how these insights have been utilised in the communications approach (and will continue to be used in future communications) to the COVID-19 response.

## Recommendations

1. **Note** the contents of this briefing
2. **Advise** if you would like to discuss the results and proposed activity — **YES / NO**
3. **Agree** to forward this briefing to the Prime Minister — **YES / NO**
4. **Agree** that this briefing be proactively released, with any appropriate redaction where information would have been withheld under the Official Information Act 1982, in October 2021. — **YES / NO**

| | |
|---|---|
| Cheryl Barnes<br>**Deputy Chief Executive, COVID-19 Response** | Hon Chris Hipkins<br>**Minister for COVID-19 Response** |
| 11/10/2021 | 14/10/2021 |

## Contact for telephone discussion if required:

| Name | Position | Telephone | 1st contact |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cheryl Barnes | Deputy Chief Executive, COVID-19 Response | s9(2)(a) | |
| Heather Peacocke | Head of Public Engagement and Communications, COVID-19 Group | | ✓ |

## Minister's office comments:

- ☐ Noted
- ☐ Seen
- ☐ Approved
- ☐ Needs change
- ☐ Withdrawn
- ☐ Not seen by Minister
- ☐ Overtaken by events
- ☐ Referred to

# COVID-19 SENTIMENT AND BEHAVIOUR RESEARCH

## Background

1. Following the Sentiment and Behaviour research undertaken in March and May 2021, the COVID-19 Group commissioned additional research with The Research Agency (TRA) and Moana Research. This March and May research were conducted as initial benchmark measures for sentiment, willingness to carry out COVID-19 related health behaviours, and information sources for COVID-19 guidance. We have since carried out further 'pulse checks' through the current Alert Level restrictions to continue to measure sentiment and how to keep the public engaged with the collective mission – Unite Against COVID-19.

2. The May 2021 research completed by TRA found the majority of New Zealanders (75%) felt the country is heading in the right direction, and the pandemic is not impacting their view of the future. Refer to DPMC-2020/21-1110 for the full summary of this work.

3. Key themes that have since emerged in subsequent 'pulse checks' have included feelings regarding lockdown measures (measuring Aucklanders views during the current resurgence), attitudes towards the vaccine rollout (as this has progressed at pace in each check), and how COVID-fatigue is impacting on New Zealanders.

4. Research completed by Moana Research in March 2021 noted a heightened sense of frustration and disappointment across the region during and after the move to Alert Level 3. Half of Aucklanders reported that information at Alert Level 3 was clear, with 80% of people thinking the information was clear on what they needed to do in Alert Level

5. The same research was also commissioned to understand the sentiment of Māori, Pacific and ethnic communities, in response to the August resurgence and the information they were receiving.

6. See Appendix 1 for all the research commissioned since May and background and methodology for reference.

## What are we seeing?

7. New Zealanders are still in support of the Government's response to COVID-19 and believe Alert Level systems are the best approach right now. There is still support for lockdowns and a regional approach to settings.

8. While people still believe that lockdowns and the Alert Level settings are our best response right now, they are looking ahead for guidance on when things will open and return to 'normal.'

9. Fatigue is also setting in around concerns about the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on mental health, access to schooling, and resuming 'normal' life. This includes opening the borders.

10. The current awareness of the *Reconnecting New Zealanders* approach and plan is currently low but to those that are aware, is does provide reassurance we are heading in the right direction.

11. Most people believe that even when the majority are vaccinated, there will be a 'difference in life' (which is left for interpretation by respondents) compared to pre COVID-19, and health behaviours will still be required. However, there is a substantial gap to 'willingness' and actual 'compliance' with the behaviours.

12. Most New Zealanders feel positively towards the vaccine rollout and the number of those that are vaccinated or are booked-in has continued to grow over the research period. This will be partly due to the ongoing progress made in the rollout and likely also due to a reduction in the segments of the population that were 'unlikely to get vaccinated' or otherwise unengaged.

13. Aucklanders surveyed reported they are compliant with public health measures, this was reported more so than the rest of New Zealand. Those who indicated non-compliance are more likely to be Pākehā with no specific age skew. This audience is more motivated by contextual considerations such as 'not wanting a lockdown' and wanting 'freedom' rather than more stable motivators like 'duty'.

## Overall themes and summary

14. The trends across our recent research (from the original baseline research in March/May and through the continual pulse checks) include:

Note that data was post weighted to be representative of the New Zealand population, in terms of age, gender, region and ethnicity.

**a) Sentiment towards the Government's response to COVID-19 and toward the COVID-19 situation**

i) Around 70 percent of those surveyed believe the country is heading in the 'right direction' with the COVID-19 response. This is an increase since July and remained stable across the August/September resurgence.

| July | August 22 | August 30 | September 13 | September 17 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 69% | 72% | 69% | 71% | 70% |

ii) New Zealanders were generally "happy or okay" with the move to Alert Level 4 in August (89% of respondents agreed the first weekend of Alert Level 4 and 87% the second weekend). Even those who were unhappy mostly recognised that it was the right thing to do. However, we are seeing "lockdown fatigue" increasingly influence sentiment from Aucklanders.

iii) In September most New Zealanders agreed with using lockdowns as an approach and the different Alert Level settings in the country, with Auckland still in Alert Level 4 and the rest of New Zealand having moved to Alert Level 3, and onto Alert Level 2.

iv) In July people were feeling quite neutral and passive about the COVID-19 situation (40%).

v) During the first week of Alert Level 4 in August we saw a shift to more negative emotions of: sadness (46% vs 15% in July), anger (21% vs 10% in July) and fear (13% vs 5% in July).

vi) There was then a shift back to neutrality at the end of August (37%), which increased in our September pulse checks (moving up to 42% and onto 50%).

vii) While the Moana Research saw a decrease in the amount of people on average who are worried about getting COVID-19 (56% vs 61%), the two pieces of this research noted more general feelings of nervousness, anxiety and concern regarding the current outbreak, sentiments were recorded straight after the August lockdown began.

viii) The top concerns reported by New Zealanders from July and through to the August/September resurgence were: The effect of COVID-19 effect on the New Zealand economy, new COVID-19 variants, not knowing when things will return to normal and the impact on businesses.

ix) An increasing concern is the effect of COVID-19 on the mental health of New Zealanders. The increase in this concern moved from 34% in July, 46% at the end of August, to 53% in the most recent pulse check (17 September). Of note is that this is also the top concern of the Under 35 audience at 52% (-1% from the total sample).

x) The audience Under 35 years of age ('Under 35s') reported they are less concerned when it comes to COVID-19 impacts compared to other age groups. To do this we show respondents a list of impacts on their life resulting from COVID-19 and have them choose which applies to them. This includes impacts such as the economy, new variants, mental health and impact on their health or health of others. Their top concerns are the effect on the mental health of New Zealanders (as per above), the financial impact it has on businesses (40%, -8% from total sample), and going in and out of different Alert Levels (41%, -1% from total sample). Under 35s are also significantly less likely to be thinking about new COVID-19 variants (34%, -14% from total sample), border/ MIQ security (19%, -12% from total), access for kids and people receiving education (17%, -9%).

xi) Both pieces of Moana Research (late August, early September) saw feelings that the Pasifika or Samoan community were unfairly judged and not reflected fairly by the media, with a small proportion of respondents referring specifically to negative perceptions directed at South Auckland. This was from respondents from all ethnicities but with Pasifika, "Other" ethnicities and Māori feeling this the most strongly.

**b) Behaviour and compliance**

i) New Zealanders are 'happy' to do their part when it comes to the current Alert Level restrictions and guidelines.

ii) Since July, there has been an increase in New Zealanders willingness to comply with health behaviours like staying home if sick, using a face covering, scanning and contacting Heathline or a doctor if unwell with COVID-19 like symptoms.

iii) Willingness is lower for Under 35s compared to total population survey across all behaviours but particularly: mask usage when required (74% compared to 79%

total), staying at home if sick (73% compared to 80% total), using the COVID-19 Tracer app (71% compared to 77% total), contacting Healthline or GP if feeling unwell with symptoms (69% compared to 73% total).

iv) Throughout the current resurgence we saw an increase in the number of New Zealanders happy to do their part when it comes to getting a COVID-19 test if unwell, moving from 56% in July and peaking at 79% in our 30 August Pulse Check. In September we have seen this number decrease but stabilise at 63% (13 September) and 64% (17 September).

v) Less than half of New Zealanders (40%) expect they will need to continue COVID-19 health behaviours even once the majority of New Zealanders are vaccinated. This has increased from 36% in July, peaking at 48% in our 13 September Pulse Check.

vi) The Moana Research saw an increase in awareness of when to get tested or get vaccinated and why but reported difficulty accessing up to date information about where to go. This research also noted reluctance in testing (20%) prior to this outbreak. Most common reasons for not getting a test were not thinking they had COVID-19, denial and a dislike of the test.

**c) Vaccines**

i) More than half of New Zealanders think the vaccine roll out is going “okay” and nearly a third more think it’s going “really well”. The 17 September Pulse Check puts the ‘okay’ group at 54%. This has remained stable since July (51%), while the “really well” group has increased from 14% in July to 34% in our 13 September Pulse Check.

ii) The ‘Vaccinated or Pending’ segment continues to grow – increasing from 40% in July to 81% on 17 September. Currently 12% fall into ‘Unlikely’, ‘Unengaged’, and ‘Rejectors’ segment groups which has fallen from 19% in July.

iii) Less than 5% of the Moana Research respondents stated they will ‘definitely not’ get the vaccine. Concerns are based around side effects and safety of the vaccine. Māori specific themes noted the need for trusted voices to encourage vaccination.

**d) *Reconnecting New Zealanders* and the future of the response**

i) 47% of New Zealanders are concerned with ‘not knowing when we will return to normal’. This is significantly reduced in respondents who are aware of the *Reconnecting New Zealanders* approach and plan. Of those New Zealanders aware of the ‘Four-Phase plan’ 33% are concerned with our ‘return to normal’.

ii) Of those who are aware of the *Reconnecting New Zealanders* plan, 77% felt the country was heading in the ‘right direction’ (up 7% from the total surveyed population).

iii) Of the individual components making up the *Reconnecting New Zealanders* plan, respondents were most aware of ‘opening Quarantine Free Travel to vaccinated travellers’ (64%), ‘creating new travel pathways based on risk from the country of origin’ (52%), ‘vaccinations eligible for all New Zealanders’ (44%) and ‘14 days MIQ for unvaccinated travellers’ (42%).

e) **Brand and information**

i) Most New Zealanders feel they're being told all the information they need to know. This has remained reasonably stable moving from 66% in July to 75% during the first weekend of lockdown in August and then back 65% on 17 September.

ii) Media briefings have remained the key information source for New Zealanders. In September, articles in the news/media as the key information source have seen a significant increase, now at 60% (up 12%) since July.

iii) COVID-19 advertising as an information source for people has seen some movement but remained stable at 45% in July, dropping to 37% in the first weekend of Alert Level 4, then increasing slightly to 40% in our 30 August Pulse Check and onto 50% in our 17 September Pulse Check.

iv) Moana Research findings saw an increased amount of people 'very clear' about what to do in Alert Level 4 (from 57% to 65%). More people find it 'very easy' to follow the Alert Level 4 rules (from 39% to 49%).

v) In July the Unite Against COVID-19 brand remained stable and strong (39% saw it as a brand they trust which is down by 3%).

## What next?

15. The research findings have been shared across the response (including operational, policy and communications workstreams) in as close to real time as possible to provide agencies and iwi/Māori partners with situational awareness and enable them to lean into identified priority areas.

16. The insights from this research have assisted us in evolving our messaging and campaigns, with a focus on motivators and audience profiles to enable segmentation and targeted approaches. This has already resulted in a bespoke youth campaign with messaging and channels tailored to the Under 35s, along with dedicated campaigns for Chinese and Indian ethnic communities.

17. We continue to work closely with the Ministry for Pacific Peoples, Te Puni Kōkiri and the Iwi Communications Collective to tailor messaging and channels for both Pacific and Māori audiences.

18. There are further research activities planned, as follows:

    a) Moana Rapid Insight report, October

    b) Resurgence campaign effectiveness testing, October

    c) TRA Pulse Check, November 2022.

    d) Understanding communication needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, timing TBC.

19. We also plan to commission research focused on the proposed Alert Level framework changes in the next two weeks to better inform the communications and campaign materials to support this work.

20. It is expected that through campaigns, communications and engagement activities, we will support the public to understand how vaccination and health behaviours fit in with the new COVID-19 framework.

21. The focus will need to remain on tailoring communications and campaigns to encourage compliance through their motivators (and not just intention to comply), combined with a strong information layer, so people understand the rules that apply to each level in a new framework.

22. We will work with your office on a communications plan which is in development to support proactive release of sentiment research, including a media briefing via Microsoft Teams at the end of October.

## Consultation

23. The research has been shared with your office and key stakeholders and partner government agencies in-confidence.

## Communications

There are already live media inquiries in relation to the sentiment research, which DPMC are assisting the Minister's Office with.

| Attachments: | |
|---|---|
| **Appendix 1:** | The methodology table below summarises the researched referenced in this memo. Accompanying the memo will be the detailed research papers that are explained in the table below. |

## Appendix 1

### Pulse checks and research summaries

| Research agency | Purpose | Research | Date run |
|---|---|---|---|
| The Research Agency (TRA) | Continue to monitor and measure how New Zealanders are feeling in relation to COVID-19, and the associated behaviours required of them. | July Pulse Check<br>August Pulse Check<br>August Pulse Check<br>September Pulse Check<br>September Pulse Check | 19-29 July 2021<br>19-22 August 2021<br>27-30 August 2021<br>9 – 13 September 2021<br>13 - 17 September 2021 |
| Moana Research | Explore how New Zealanders feel and what they think about in light of recent COVID-19 outbreak. (focused on Pacific, Māori, Asian and South East Asian communities) | Rapid Insights Report<br>Rapid Insights Report | 28-29 August 2021<br>31 August – 5 September 2021 |

### Methodology table

| Research agency | Research | Date | Method |
|---|---|---|---|
| The Research Agency (TRA) | July Pulse Check | 19-29 July 2021 | For this survey, a quantitative method was used, with a sample size of 827 New Zealanders aged 16 years and over including 70 Māori and 50 Pasifika participants. The data was collected digitally and post weighted to be representative of the NZ population Confidence interval is at 95% and margin of error +/- 3.41%. Note, when mentioning 'significant' increases or decreases – these are statistically significant. (See Attachment A) |
| | August Pulse Check | 19-22 August 2021 | **Quantitative method pulse check - 19/20 August**<br><br>Our sample size was 308 New Zealanders 16 years and over. No hard quotas were set in order to achieve our sample target as quickly as possible. However, we sent out sample according to nationally representative quotas and was post weighted to be nationally representative in terms of age, gender and region only. Margin for error at the 95% level of confidence: +/- 6 percentage points. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **Qualitative method pulse check - 21/22 August**<br><br>A total of 21 qualitative (20-30 minutes long) telephone interviews were conducted over Saturday 21 and Sunday 22 August with a cross-section of the population including Māori, Pasifika, other ethnicities (Chinese/Indian), Auckland, rest of North Island, South Island, Youth – 18 -25, Lower socio, Disabled, those with disabled people in their bubbles, and a few who are not on board with L4 requirements. |
| | August Pulse Check | 27-30 August 2021 | **Qualitative method pulse check – 28/29 August**<br><br>A total of 20 qualitative (20-30 minutes long) telephone interviews were conducted over Saturday 28 and Sunday 29 August with a cross-section of the population including Māori, Pasifika, other ethnicities (Chinese/Indian), Auckland, rest of North Island, South Island, Youth – 18 -25, Lower socio, Disabled, those with disabled people in their bubbles. A small number were the same people from the previous qualitative check. |
| | August Pulse Check<br><br>(Continued) | | **Quantitative method pulse check – 27-30 August**<br>Fieldwork was launched on Friday 27 August, the day it was announced that regions south of the Auckland border would move to Alert Level 3 at 11:59pm on Tuesday 31 August while Auckland would likely stay at Alert Level 4 for another two weeks from this date.<br><br>The survey finished on the morning of Friday 30 August 2021. This is a second in a round of pulse checks and where possible, key comparisons are made to the 19 August lockdown pulse research – which was conducted overnight on the 19th of August, the second day of the nationwide lockdown. Our sample size was 305 New Zealanders 16 years and over. No hard quotas were set in order to achieve our sample target as quickly as possible. However, we sent out sample according to nationally representative quotas and was post weighted to be nationally representative in terms of age, gender and region only. Margin for error at the 95% level of confidence: +/- 5.6 percentage points. |
| | September Pulse Check | 9 – 13 September 2021 | **Quantitative method pulse check**<br><br>Fieldwork was launched on Thursday the 9th of September through to the 13th of September. Where possible, key comparisons are made to the 30th of August pulse research – which was conducted over the weekend of Friday 27th August through Monday 30th of August where the entire country was still at lockdown. Comparisons are also made to (1) the 19th August lockdown pulse which was conducted overnight on the 19th of August (the second day of the nationwide lockdown) and (2) the July 2021 Immediate Needs Dip research which was conducted |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | during an Alert Level 1 period. Due to differences in surveys, comparisons are indicative only, even when significant. |
| | September Pulse Check | 13 – 17 September 2021 | **Quantitative method pulse check**<br><br>This sample comes from fieldwork running from Monday 13th of September through Friday 17th of September.<br><br>Comparisons will be made to the 13 September pulse check research – reporting on the first half of the sample from our COVID-19 sentiment and behaviour tracker. Where possible, key comparisons are also made to the 30 August and 19 August lockdown pulses research – which was conducted overnight on the 19th of August, the second day of the nationwide lockdown. Comparisons are also made to the July 2021 Immediate Needs Dip research which was conducted during an Alert Level 1 period. Due to differences in the August and July surveys, comparisons are indicative only, even when significant.<br><br>Our sample consists of 329 New Zealanders 16 years and over. No hard quotas were set to achieve our sample target as quickly as possible. However, we sent out sample according to nationally representative quotas. Our sample was post weighted to be nationally representative in terms of age, gender, and region only.<br><br>Margin for error at the 95% level of confidence: +/- 5.4 percentage points. |
| Moana Research | Rapid Insights Report | 28-29 August 2021 | This study is a collaboration between Moana Research, FEM Research Limited, MNSV Health & Wellness Consultants and Asian Family Services and has a focus on ethnic communities where voices may not always come through in our main research projects.<br><br>The research was undertaken in both quantitative and qualitative methods.<br><br>A total of 36 qualitative (20-30 minutes long) ethnic-specific telephone interviews were conducted over Saturday 28 and Sunday 29 August with Māori (incl young Adults), Pasifika, Asian, Southeast Asian, NZ European.<br><br>In addition, a quantitative survey with 33 questions was developed to gain rapid insights about experiences and perceptions of COVID- 19. The survey focused on gaining feedback from a wide sample of the NZ population. For this report, the first 420 responses were analysed. Oversampled for Pacific over the weekend but will shift over time as survey is disseminated widely. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | 31 August – 5 September | A total of 33 qualitative (20-30 minutes long) ethnic-specific telephone interviews were conducted over the period with Māori (including young Adults), Pasifika, Asian, Southeast Asian and NZ European.<br><br>In addition, the quantitative survey continued to be run to gain rapid insights about experiences and perceptions of COVID- 19. The survey focused on gaining feedback from a wide sample of the NZ population. The total sample for this research is now 687 (a further 267 responses were added this week). |