



22 June 2022

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Ref: OIA-2021/22-1068

Dear [REDACTED]

Official Information Act request relating to mis/disinformation

I refer to your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) on 7 March 2022. You requested:

“Can I please have a copy of all advice, briefings, reports, aides memoire and memos prepared by the Department relating to mis/disinformation since January 2021.”

The time frame for responding to your request was extended under section 15A of the Act by 40 working days because it necessitated a search through a large quantity of information, and further consultation was needed before a decision could be made on the request. Following this extension, I am now in a position to respond. I apologise for the further delay in my response as both the identification and collation of material and subsequent consultation took longer than originally anticipated.

In considering the scope of your request, I have taken your request to be for advice, briefings, reports, aides-memoire, and memos prepared by DPMC relating to COVID-19 mis/disinformation between 1 January 2021 and 7 March 2022.

Information being released

Extracts

Note that some information which has been identified as relevant to your request is provided in the form of extracts, as much of the remaining information contained within these documents is out of scope of your request. These extracts have been included as **Appendix One** to this response letter.

Some information has been withheld from these extracts under the following sections of the Act:

- section 6(a), to avoid prejudicing the security or defence of New Zealand;
- section 9(2)(ba)(i), to protect the supply of similar information in the future;
- section 9(2)(f)(iv), to maintain the confidentiality of advice tendered by or to Ministers and officials;
- section 9(2)(g)(i), to maintain the effective conduct of public affairs through the free and frank expression of opinion; and
- section 9(2)(j), to enable negotiations to be carried on without prejudice or disadvantage.

Documents

Additionally, I am releasing documents which fall within the scope of your request and are attached to this response as **Appendix Two**.

Some material has been withheld from these documents under the following sections of the Act:

- section 6(a), as outlined above;
- section 6(b)(i), to protect the entrusting of information to the Government of New Zealand on a basis of confidence by the Government of any other country or any agency of such a Government
- section 9(2)(a), as the withholding of the information is necessary to protect the privacy of natural persons;
- section 9(2)(ba)(i), to protect the supply of similar information in the future;
- section 9(2)(f)(iv), as outlined above; and
- section 9(2)(g)(i), as outlined above.

Information withheld in full

Briefings

In addition, Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern received a copy of the briefing "*Improving Reporting and Triaging/Response Systems for Concerning Behaviours, Cybercrime and Online Harms*" (29 October 2021), in both her capacity as Prime Minister and Minister for National Security and Intelligence. It is necessary at this time to withhold this briefing in full under sections 9(2)(f)(iv) and 9(2)(g)(i) of the Act, as outlined above.

I can however advise that this briefing relates to recommendation 12 of the report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain on 15 March 2019, which the Government agreed to in principle in December 2020. Accordingly, while mis/disinformation is among the issues considered as part of this work, mis/disinformation is not the main driver of this briefing.

A further document, prepared for inter-agency consideration, titled *Resourcing efforts to address mis/disinformation challenges* dated 8 December 2021, has also been withheld in full under sections 6(a) and 9(2)(f)(iv) of the Act, for the reasons outlined above.

Oral update

As you may be aware, the Prime Minister also receives verbal updates directly from the Chief Executive of DPMC in their role as the head of the National Security System, and as Chair of the Officials Committee for Domestic and External Security Coordination (ODESC), as required. The Prime Minister received one such oral update from the Chief Executive of DPMC in their capacity as Chair of ODESC in November 2021 that is in scope of your request, however it is necessary to withhold the details of this update under section 6(a) of the Act, for the reasons outlined above.

I can advise that this update noted, at a high level, the extreme nature of some of the rhetoric used online, the mis/disinformation trend, and that the related protest activity at that time remained largely peaceful.

Aide-Memoire

A paragraph from an Aide-Memoire written in February ahead of a regular meeting between Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern and senior officials in March was also identified as in scope of your

request, however it is necessary to withhold this paragraph under section 6(a) of the Act, for the reasons outlined above.

Policy Advisory Group briefings

Also identified as relevant to your request are some briefings provided by the DPMC Policy Advisory Group to the Prime Minister. These briefings are provided to the Prime Minister in confidence to support her in her role as leader of the Government and chair of Cabinet. These briefings are withheld in their entirety under sections 9(2)(f)(iv) and 9(2)(g)(i), as outlined above.

National Assessments Bureau information

Some material identified within scope of your request was prepared by the National Assessments Bureau. I have decided to withhold this information in full under section 6(a) of the Act, as outlined above.

Information publicly available

Additional information within the scope of your request has been identified within COVID-19 Response Weekly Reports which have been proactively released on the Unite Against COVID-19 website. These reports are accessible through the following link and are therefore refused under 18(d) of the Act as this information is publicly available at:

covid19.govt.nz/about-our-covid-19-response/proactive-releases/reviews-and-audits/#proactive-releases-%E2%80%94-4-april-2022

A final report *The Evolving Picture of Online/Offline Activism Linked to the COVID-19 Pandemic* dated 29 October 2021 was identified as being within scope of your request. This document is scheduled for proactive release and is therefore refused under section 18(d) of the Act, as the information will soon be publicly available.

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.

The Unite Against COVID-19 website also contains further information regarding misinformation and is accessible via the following link: covid19.govt.nz/prepare-and-stay-safe/misinformation-scams-and-online-harm.

Yours sincerely



Nicky Eaton
**Acting Deputy Chief Executive
National Security Group**

Extracts of information relevant to disinformation/misinformation

Fortnightly Reports

The following excerpts from fortnightly reports prepared by the National Security Group within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) for the Minister for National Security and Intelligence.

From report dated 21 July 2021

"Mis/disinformation"

1. *Since we briefed you in April on efforts to strengthen resilience to mis/disinformation, there have been some key developments:*
 - a. *There is an increasing level of overlap between the networks and individuals producing mis/dis-information on one hand, and threatening online content and behaviour on the other. This has made the landscape more complex for those, such as [section 9(2)(ba)(i)], seeking to work in this area.*
 - b. *The multi-stakeholder group was convened for its first hui in Auckland in early June. Academics, researchers and representatives of a number of communities told us that current government efforts need to be focused on supporting those communities that have been the victims of online hatred and harassment.*
 - c. **[Two sentences withheld under section 9(2)(ba)(i)]**
 - d. *You also recently received a letter from InternetNZ detailing the urgent need for funding to support non-governmental activities to counter mis and disinformation. We are in regular contact with InternetNZ and are working with agencies to identify what funding might be available in the current financial year.*
2. *The next meeting of the multi-stakeholder group is expected to take place in August, once further progress has been made to address the issues above. It will focus on funding needs and the development of a whole-of-society strategic framework. We will brief Ministers on developments following that meeting."*

From report dated 13 October 2021

"Mis/Disinformation"

- *An inter-agency group convened by DPMC, in coordination with academic and non-governmental partners, continues to develop approaches to address COVID-19 mis- and disinformation. This includes improving the process for reporting and triaging misinformation, further refining the COVID-19 strategic communications approach, reaching out to support communities, and working with social media platforms to limit the spread of misinformation. The situation continues to evolve as a number of prominent spreaders of false information have switched from mainstream to less public social media platforms, and as key groups take their mis- and disinformation activities offline to target schools and vulnerable communities."*

From report dated 8 December 2021

“Mis/disinformation: Establishment of a virtual triage and reporting cell

- *Following the recent escalation of concerning mis/disinformation and threats against the COVID-19 response, DPMC has brought together the National Assessments Bureau (NAB), the Ministry of Health’s [withheld under section 9(2)(ba)(i)] and [withheld under section 9(2)(ba)(i)] into a virtual triaging and reporting cell. Its purpose will be to provide a structure for collating, synthesising and reporting information to you, other relevant Ministers, and senior officials on the impact of mis/disinformation on public safety and the associated effect of COVID-19 response measures on social cohesion.*
- *The first report to Ministers is expected before Christmas and will likely become fortnightly from February 2022. The purpose will be to provide timely, accurate and contextualised information on the misinformation environment surrounding the COVID-19 response, and to ensure visibility of potential or emerging public safety or national security risks. The cell will report to the Interagency Coordination Group, which is convened by DPMC to support efforts to build resilience to mis/disinformation.”*

Aide Memoire

In addition, in her capacity as the Minister for National Security and Intelligence, Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern received an aide-memoire ahead of a regular meeting with senior officials in February 2022.

We have taken the exact details of this meeting to be out of scope of your request, but if requested, we would need to withhold such details for security reasons. This aide memoire contained the following information relevant to your request.

“Item 1: Security challenges to New Zealand’s COVID-19 response

3. *Your Chief of Staff requested an update on recent cross-government work on security threats to the COVID-19 response, including mis/dis-information and violent extremism.*
4. *In December 2021 a trial process was established to more effectively triage and report information on less-than-criminal threats to the COVID-19 response. Analysts from the National Assessments Bureau (NAB) and the Ministry of Health’s [withheld under section 9(2)(ba)(i)], in coordination with [withheld under section 9(2)(ba)(i)] and the [withheld under section 9(2)(ba)(i)], are working to ensure that relevant and available information is properly assessed, shared and reported to decision makers. A first ‘bulletin’ was distributed before Christmas, with more regular products planned to follow.*
5. *As one of the key information streams, for the past six months [withheld under section 9(2)(ba)(i)] has been providing regular summaries of the key mis/disinformation and anti-authority/anti-vaccine narratives circulating online. This information has been invaluable to understanding how trends are evolving over time, particularly as new policies – such as the national “red” traffic light level and the vaccination of 5 -11 year olds – are rolled out. [withheld under section 9(2)(j)].*
6. *This work helps to inform our strategic communications approach, which focuses on the following:*
 - a. *Supporting a whole of society approach:*
 - i. *using a coordinated approach across government and into communities;*
 - and*

- ii. *collective planning, collaboration and delivery through multi sector approach that is innovative and inclusive for all.*
 - b. *Increasing the public's resilience to disinformation and online harms by promoting digital literacy and critical thinking.*
 - c. *Promoting credible information through effective communication and rebutting, correcting or countering disinformation with facts, and;*
 - d. *Preventing the propagation of false and damaging content:*
 - i. *by ensuring a robust reporting mechanism is communicated;*
 - ii. *engaging with social media platforms to prevent the spread of COVID-19 misinformation; and*
 - iii. *encouraging social media managers to maintain a safe community space.*
7. *There is, however, specific concern within Māori communities about misinformation affecting vaccine take-up, and the COVID-19 Group has been directly engaging through the Māori Council's COVID-19 response framework – Ngā Mana Whakahaere o COVID-19 - to see how we can best support Māori to counter misinformation in their communities.*
8. *Another key focus is the increasing online harassment, doxxing and threats directed towards communities, public figures and public servants. In December, the Human Rights Commission launched the 'Dial It Down' campaign in an effort to reduce the amount of online hate in COVID-19 discussions, and work continues on RCOI Recommendation 12 (a single reporting and response mechanism for concerning behaviours). However, more still needs to be done to support victims of online harassment and threats. COVID-19 Group, DIA and PSC are considering how to better support public servants and public figures who have been increasingly targeted online, and **[withheld under section 9(2)(f)(iv)].**"*

You will note that both this aide-memoire excerpt, and the fortnightly report excerpt from 8 December 2021 refer to the establishment of a virtual triaging and reporting cell, which would provide regular reports/bulletins to the Minister. These bulletins were discontinued in early 2022.

Briefing

STRENGTHENING NEW ZEALAND'S RESILIENCE TO MIS/DISINFORMATION

To: Prime Minister & Minister for National Security & Intelligence (Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern)

Date	20/12/2020	Priority	Routine
Deadline	29/01/2021	Briefing Number	2021NSP/031

Purpose


1. To seek your agreement to coordination mechanisms for addressing mis/disinformation issues, and endorsement to develop a strategic framework to strengthen New Zealand's resilience to mis/disinformation.

Recommendations

1. **Note** that while work has been done by agencies, academia and civil society to address COVID-19-related disinformation, this activity is currently not coordinated in pursuit of a common strategy;
2. **Agree** that, given the multiple equities for this issue, DPMC leads government efforts to strengthen resilience to disinformation, in close coordination with the proposed Interagency Coordination Group; **YES / NO**
3. **Note** that officials consider it is preferable for efforts to counter mis/disinformation to be primarily driven from outside of government, i.e. by civil society organisations, academia and the media;
4. **Agree** that DPMC and the Interagency Coordination Group develop a Strategic Framework for Strengthening New Zealand's Resilience to Mis/Disinformation for consideration by Ministers in ^{9(2)(f)(iv)} **YES / NO**

RESTRICTED

5. **Agree** that the following group of Ministers should be the first points of referral for work to strengthen New Zealand's resilience to mis/disinformation:
- i. Minister for National Security & Intelligence (Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern); **YES / NO**
 - ii. Minister of Education & Minister for COVID-19 Response (Hon Chris Hipkins);
 - iii. Minister of Health & Minister Responsible for the GCSB and NZSIS (Hon Andrew Little);
 - iv. Minister for Broadcasting and Media & Minister of Justice (Hon Kris Faafoi);
 - v. Minister of Internal Affairs (Hon Jan Tinetti);
 - vi. Minister for Digital Economy and Communications (Hon Dr David Clark).
6. **Agree** to refer this paper - for discussion around the proposed recommendations - to the Group of Ministers at Recommendation 5, and to the following Ministers whose agencies will be represented on the Interagency Coordination Group: **YES / NO**
- i. Minister of Arts, Culture and Heritage (Hon Carmel Sepuloni)
 - ii. Minister of Foreign Affairs (Hon Nanaia Mahuta)
 - iii. Minister of Police (Hon Poto Williams)
7. **Indicate** if you wish to discuss elements of the proposed strategy – including disinformation monitoring, working with civil society and engagement with Ministers – at the next available national security and intelligence briefing. **YES / NO**


Tony Lynch
Deputy Chief Executive
National Security Group
DPMC

20/01/21
...../...../.....

Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern
Minister for National Security & Intelligence

...../...../.....

Minister's office comments:

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

Contact for telephone discussion if required:

Name	Position	Telephone		1st contact
Dan Eaton	Director, National Security Policy Directorate, DPMC	9(2)(a)	9(2)(a)	
Greg Mitchell-Kouttab	Principal Policy Advisor, National Security Policy Directorate, DPMC	9(2)(a)	9(2)(a)	✓



STRENGTHENING NEW ZEALAND'S RESILIENCE TO MIS/DISINFORMATION

Executive Summary

1. While mis/disinformation is not a new phenomenon, its reach and veracity has increased exponentially in recent years via social media channels. Its impact on national security – through the potential erosion of trust in democratic institutions and the undermining of public health campaigns – became dramatically apparent through 2020.
2. Several of 6(a) [redacted] have witnessed unprecedented social and political polarisation driven in part by disinformation campaigns conducted by both state and non-state actors. Fuelled by fundamental distrust in the media and the political process, these countries face a significant challenge in trying to counter disinformation.
3. Mis/disinformation can create and amplify social divisions, challenge national values, foster extremist views, break down social cohesion and, in some cases, incite violence towards minority groups. Conspiracy theories can also have a corrosive effect, undermining trust in public institutions and the social contract, with attendant consequences for policy making and service delivery.
4. New Zealand still has relatively high levels of public trust in media and state institutions. This was positively demonstrated in 2020, as media outlets and civil society organisations successfully countered ('pre-bunked') a number of COVID-19 and elections-related disinformation campaigns before these could take hold in the population.
5. We cannot take this situation for granted, however, as we are unlikely to remain immune from these global trends. 9(2)(f)(iv) [redacted]
6. [redacted]
7. Oversight of mis/disinformation is a sensitive issue, as any public commentary or perceived control of a "counter-disinformation effort" can reinforce conspiracy meta-narratives about state manipulation of information and give legitimacy to those claiming an erosion of free speech. 9(2)(f)(iv) [redacted]

9(2)(f)(iv)

8.

9.

10.

11. We would welcome a discussion with you on the policy proposals outlined in this paper and the attached report. In particular, we would welcome your views on:
- how we engage with, and lift the capacity of, civil society, the media and academia to lead efforts to counter disinformation in New Zealand;
 - whether monitoring should be done by government agencies or by non-governmental partners (e.g. universities and/or private organisations); and
 - how you would envisage Ministerial engagement on this sensitive issue.

Purpose

12. To seek your agreement to coordination mechanisms for addressing mis/disinformation issues, and endorsement to develop a strategic framework to strengthen New Zealand's resilience to mis/disinformation.

Background

13. In October 2020, DPMC's National Security Policy Directorate took an earlier version of the attached Policy Insights paper to the Security and Intelligence Board (SIB)² to update them on work undertaken across the system to understand and counter the disinformation problem – particularly in relation to COVID-19 – and to highlight the gaps in New Zealand's ability to respond to disinformation.
14. SIB Chief Executives agreed that officials should seek guidance from Ministers on the proposed coordination of, and strategic framework for, strengthening New Zealand's resilience to mis/disinformation.

¹ That group will comprise: DIA, DPMC, MBIE, MFAT, MCH, MOE, MOH, MOJ, NZ Police, NZSIS and the GCSB.

² SIB is a governance board that brings together chief executives with national security responsibilities and focuses on external and internal security threats and intelligence issues.

RESTRICTED

15. Given the complex crossover of mis/disinformation with a number of other significant national security issues, it should be noted that there will be some useful connections between this work and the development of a number of countering violent extremism (CVE) and social inclusion-based initiatives arising from recommendations of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Terrorist Attack on Christchurch Masjidain.

***Disinformation** is false or misleading content (or the omission of content) designed to achieve a strategic purpose. Whether for ideological or commercial goals, the effort is designed to influence audience perceptions, opinions and/or behaviour (e.g. QAnon conspiracy theories).*

***Misinformation** is information that is false or misleading, but is not produced or disseminated in pursuit of an underlying ideological or commercial purpose (e.g. anti-fluoride information).*


Building & Strengthening NZ's Resilience to Mis/Disinformation

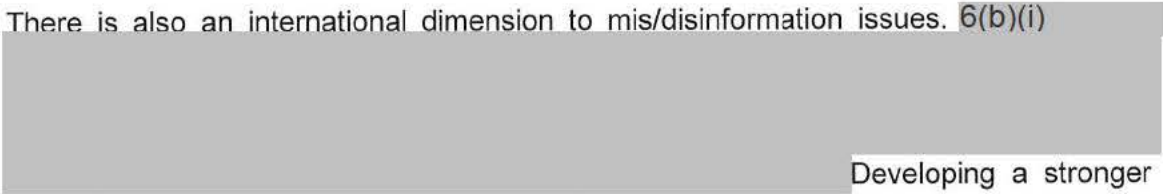
16. Since the first COVID-19 lockdown in March, during which we witnessed the rapid spread of COVID-19-related disinformation, agencies have done a lot of work to understand and respond to the problem. Using academic and non-governmental research as the basis, agencies and media outlets have become more adept at proactive communications strategies to counter mis/disinformation narratives and, where possible, to get ahead of potential mis/disinformation campaigns (e.g. COVID-19 vaccines).

17. 9(2)(f)(iv)

18.

9(2)(f)(iv)



19. There is also an international dimension to mis/disinformation issues. ~~6(b)(i)~~
- 

Developing a stronger domestic approach to mis/disinformation would effectively and credibly support these international engagements.

Next Steps

20. Subject to your agreement, DPMC will commence work, in close consultation with the Interagency Coordination Group, on developing the proposed strategic framework.
- 9(2)(f)(iv)

Financial Implications

21. 9(2)(f)(iv)

22.

Consultation

23. This paper was consulted with the nascent Interagency Coordination Group comprising: DIA, DPMC, GCSB, MBIE, MFAT, Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Justice, NZ Police and NZSIS.

24. 9(2)(f)(iv)

Communications


25. As part of the process to develop a Strategic Framework, we will work with non-government partners to establish the most appropriate and effective communications approach.
26. International experience shows that it is best not to directly address mis/disinformation, particularly through an official spokesperson, as this can lend legitimacy to the message/messenger or reinforce government conspiracy narratives.

Attachments:		
Attachment A:	Restricted	Strengthening New Zealand's Resilience to Mis/Disinformation



ATTACHMENT A

9(2)(f)(iv)



18 November 2021

To: Members, COVID-19 Chief Executives Board

COVID-19 Disinformation and harmful content

Purpose

1. This paper provides the COVID-19 Chief Executives Board (CCB) with an overview of the landscape of misinformation and disinformation currently circulating in Aotearoa New Zealand and sets out the approach agencies are taking to respond to these online harms.

Disinformation and harmful online content in Aotearoa New Zealand has been escalating in intensity and impact...

2. The circulation of COVID-19 and vaccine disinformation continues to escalate globally. With the Delta outbreak and the momentum of the vaccine programme there has been an increase in observed coordinated disinformation circulating in New Zealand.
3. Over the past six weeks there has also been a notable increase in the number of, and attendance at, COVID-19 related protest events. While these have seen a slight escalation in disruptive techniques (e.g. deliberate road-blocking, and action targeting the Prime Minister), activity has largely remained peaceful. Incidents of confrontation, violence and vandalism have been observed, however, these appear to be isolated incidents. There is a concerning surge in targeting schools for the distribution of misinformation, particularly in relation to the vaccine.
4. Growing frustrations with ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, income loss, the inability to travel and the perception that vaccine mandates are infringing on personal freedoms, appear to have mobilised a wide range of groups, individuals and causes (including both vaccinated and unvaccinated) to join in physical and online protest.
5. This has fuelled increasing and more hateful online and real-world harassment and threats towards elected officials, health professionals, journalists, academics, frontline workers and vulnerable communities (including women, Māori and ethnic communities).

... but widespread violence and unrest does not appear to be imminent.

6. This is largely “noise” generated in an unfiltered and anonymous online environment, however, verbal threats and intimidation have forced the closure of several COVID-19 vaccination centres and caused serious anxiety amongst affected groups, and we cannot discount it having an inciting effect on individuals holding extreme views.
7. New Zealand Police and the intelligence and security agencies have systems in place to identify and respond to credible threats of violence and mass mobilisation.

8. The National Security System is activated at a low level to ensure agencies are coordinated in their information-sharing, assessment and dissemination, and will continue to monitor closely.

Deliberate confusion of the information environment can threaten public safety, fracture social cohesion and undermine public confidence.

9. The current narratives of COVID-19 misinformation¹ and disinformation² in Aotearoa New Zealand are mostly in relation to the vaccines, but there are continuing persistent themes within the content that is violently critical of the government's approach to COVID-19. Predominant themes include resentment of and opposition to health measures and authorities, conspiratorial beliefs, alternative medicines, and more general mistrust of government/suppression of truth, which highlight issues wider than the pandemic narratives within the content.

10. s9(2)(g)(i)

11. Globally we have seen links with disinformation and conspiracy theorists as a tool for recruitment and radicalisation to reduce health controls and to cause violence. Mis- and disinformation leading towards extremism is a trend that has been growing since before the start of the pandemic (e.g. the 2016 US Election). This is likely to be a permanent reality.

12. s9(2)(g)(i)

13. A recent discussion paper from 'The Disinformation Project' at Te Pūnaha Matatini describes the misinformation and disinformation landscape in New Zealand in more detail (Appendix A).

Further escalation of these activities is likely in the short term, particularly in response to COVID-19 mitigation measures.

14. There is evidence that continued restrictions of freedoms, including lockdowns, vaccine mandates, vaccine targets, mandatory scanning and mask wearing, as well as introducing policies that may drive emotional behaviours (e.g. vaccinations for 5-11 year olds), are all triggers for mobilising further disinformation and potential protest activity. We should consider the compounding effect of multiple measures, as well as each individual restriction.

¹ Information that may unintentionally deceive.

² Information that may be deliberately intended to deceive.

15. Many international partners, including Australia, Canada and the UK, have mandated vaccines without popular revolt or extremist acts. However, there is a shared concern that mandates may provide the motivation for a very limited number of people with extremist views to conduct actions beyond lawful protest. This is likely to occur when vaccine mandates come into force, if lockdowns become necessary during the summer months or if vaccination is rolled out to 5-11 year olds.

Agencies are working together to determine the level and nature of the threat to the COVID-19 response from mis- and disinformation.

16. In the national security system, NZ Police and the intelligence and security agencies maintain several layers of security and intelligence that focus on the potential extremist threats to the COVID-19 response specifically, and public safety more generally. This system is effective at monitoring for credible/imminent national security threats and responding accordingly.
17. A National Security System Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) has been activated by DPMC to ensure that the processes and structures are in place, at this critical juncture of the COVID-19 Response, for the right information to go to the right places to inform the right responses. Officials are developing these processes and structures and identifying potential trigger/escalation points.
18. DPMC will convene Watch Groups and ODESC meetings if needed to escalate decision-making.
19. It is also important to ensure that how protest situations and the increasing amount of mis/disinformation and online harms are handled, is done deliberately and in the moment, to positively influence the trajectory of the situation and future sentiment.

Using insights reporting on broader mis/disinformation trends for COVID-19 mitigations

20. Since August 2021, in response to a request from DPMC (COVID-19 Group and the National Security Group) for insights into the mis/disinformation landscape and its effect on COVID-19 mitigation measures, Te Pūnaha Matatini³ (TPM) has been providing regular analytical reports on the online COVID-19 mis/disinformation and extremist landscape. TPM researchers have been able to access a wide range of online platforms and networks, and use both data and narrative analysis to show how there has been an increase over time in extremist rhetoric within New Zealand.
21. This reporting, supplemented with other commissioned research and insights, has been an important source of information for the Ministry of Health and the COVID-19 Group, as they have developed the government's communications approach and the delivery of the vaccination programme. s9(2)(g)(i)
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

³ The Aotearoa New Zealand Centre of Research Excellence for Complex Systems, at Auckland University.

Improving coordination, synthesis and assessment

- 22. While we are confident that information is being shared in a timely fashion with agencies to enable them to respond to specific, imminent and credible threats, we are looking to close gaps in effective, centralised reporting, triaging, synthesising and assessment of threat information (especially as the volume of information increases).
- 23. Various agencies have specific mandates or responsibilities that guide their responses to disinformation:
 - a. NZ Police: ensuring public safety against illegal and/or violent acts;
 - b. DIA: regulatory responsibility for objectionable publications;
 - c. Classification Office: responsible for classifying films, videos, and publications including defining content that may need to be restricted or banned in New Zealand;
 - d. Netsafe: responsible for harmful digital communication and can assist those who have been targeted for online abuse;
 - e. CERT NZ: coordinates reports of cyber security issues from the public, supports businesses, organisations and individuals affected by cyber security incidents, and provides trusted and authoritative information and advice.
- 24. A stakeholder map of agencies' respective mandates to respond within the disinformation harm spectrum (provided their threshold/mandate for action is reached) is provided in Appendix B.
- 25. These statutory mandates can restrict the lens through which the material is considered or handled (e.g. law enforcement, objectionable material) and material trending towards but not meeting those statutory thresholds could fall through the gaps. Other agencies are receiving insights information without context, creating a sense of heightened alert if they are not equipped to assess it properly or if they are not aware of mitigations already in place.
- 26. An interagency working group (chaired by the DPMC COVID-19 Group) has been established to ensure that the right information is being sent to the right places to elicit the most appropriate responses to harmful online content. There are existing systems in place to detect and mitigate terrorist or violent extremist threats and efforts to escalate peaceful protest to violence. s9(2)(f)(iv)
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
- 27. s9(2)(ba)(i)
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
- 28. The COVID-19 Group is building capacity to glean insights from landscape reports to inform strategic communications and sector coordination. s9(2)(f)(iv)
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
- 29. s9(2)(f)(iv)
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]

30. Examples of the COVID-19 communications activity to respond to misinformation include:

- Refresh of high-level disinformation messaging given the escalating environment
- Inclusion of online safety content on the UAC website <https://covid19.govt.nz/misinformation>
- Supporting projects like Stuff: The Whole Truth to ensure a wide range of information is available to audiences across New Zealand, and the media event on November 9 with the TPM “Disinformation Project”.
- Animation in development by Unite Against COVID-19 focussed on preventing people from sharing misinformation
- A dedicated vaccine communications plan to ensure those hesitant to be vaccinated have access to reliable information (MoH lead).
- Elevation of reliable sources of information and development of resources to respond to emerging narratives primarily at: <https://covid19.govt.nz/covid-19-vaccination-your-questions-answered/>
- Marketing campaign to build awareness and resilience to misinformation

Recommendations

31. I recommend the COVID-19 Chief Executive Board members:

- a. **Note** that disinformation and harmful online content has been escalating in intensity and impact and coordination but widespread violence does not seem to be imminent.
- b. s9(2)(ba)(i) [REDACTED]
- c. **Note** that agencies have specific responsibility for managing disinformation and online harm (as set out in Appendix B) but greater coordination is required to ensure that the right information is being properly received, assessed and triaged.
- d. **Note** that an interagency working group (chaired by the DPMC COVID-19 Group) has been established to manage this and establish and support the appropriate processes.
- e. s9(2)(ba)(i) [REDACTED]

Rachel Sutherland

Manager, System Assurance and Continuous Improvement

COVID-19 Group

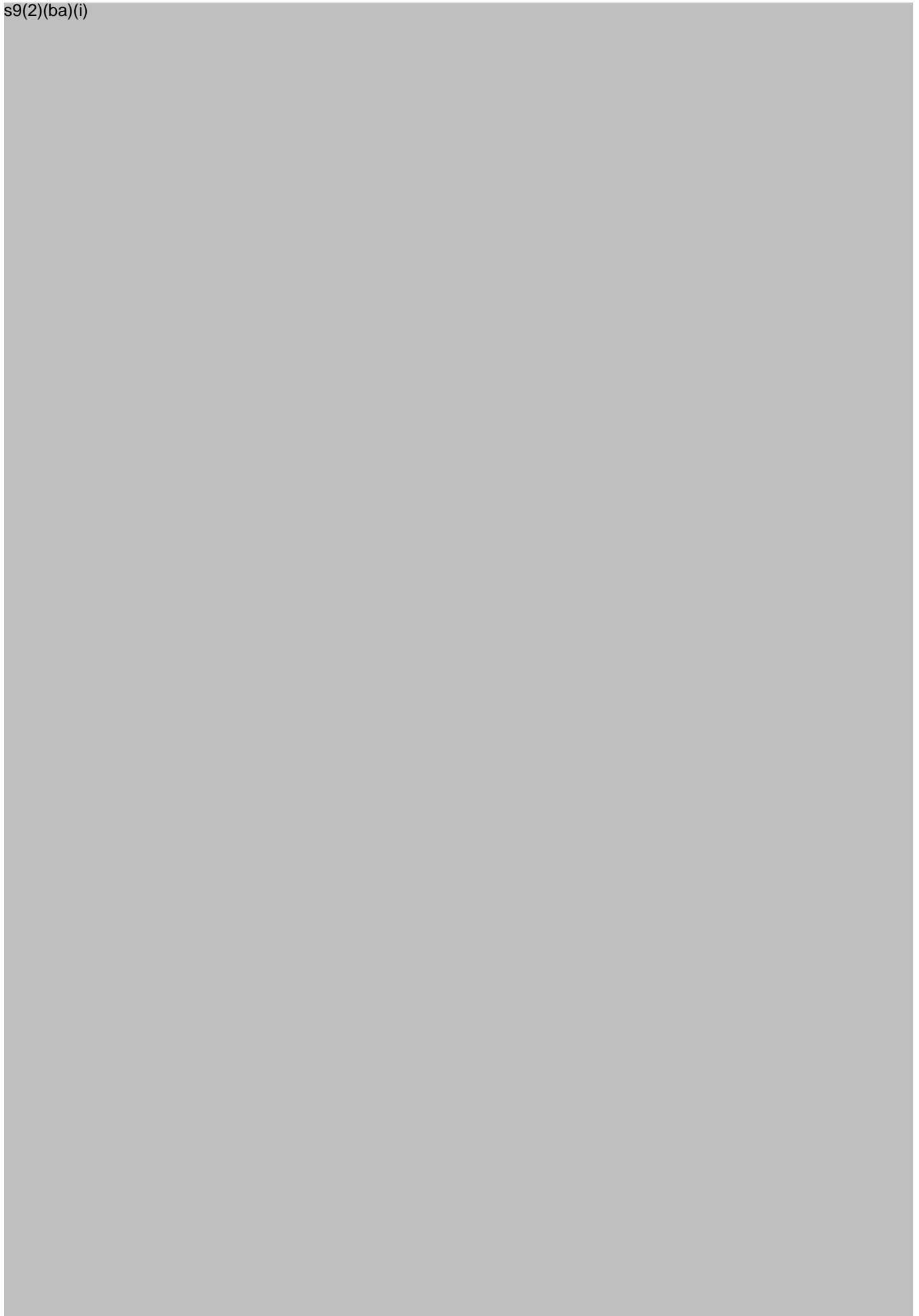
Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

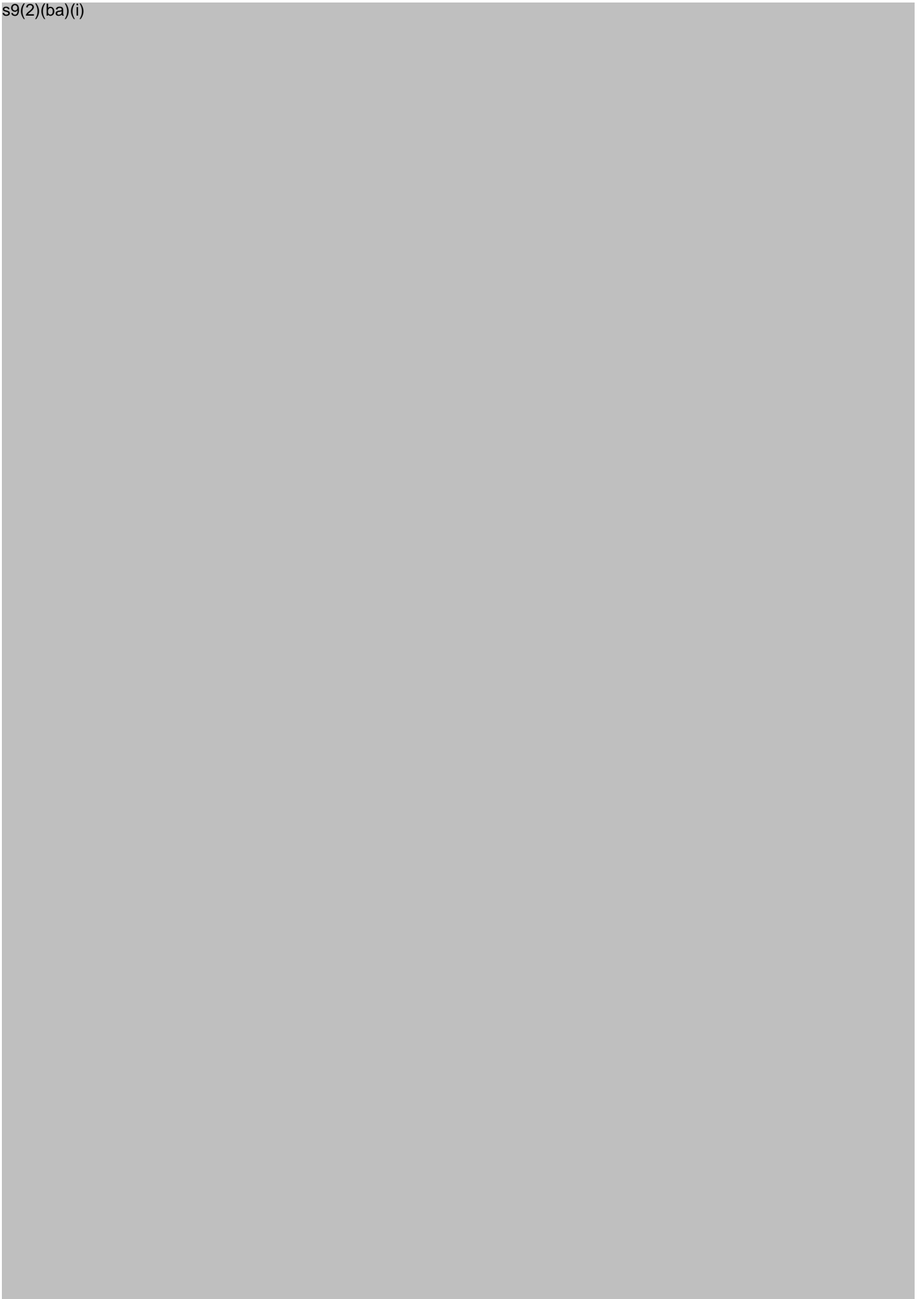
APPENDIX A withheld in full under section 9(2)(ba)(i)











4 March 2022

To: Members, COVID-19 Chief Executives Board

COVID-19 - Importance of Social Cohesion for the Response

Purpose

1. This paper provides the COVID-19 Chief Executives Board (CCB) with an overview of the importance of Social Cohesion for the COVID-19 response in Aotearoa New Zealand, the impacts on public confidence and social licence (key enablers for a successful COVID-19 response), and an overview of the current work being done to enhance social cohesion in our response to COVID-19.

Context

2. Aotearoa New Zealand's response to COVID-19 has been one of the most successful in the world in preventing deaths from COVID-19. A significant factor in our success to date has been strong public trust and confidence in the response and effective use of communications. However, two years of pandemic response, responding to multiple COVID-19 variants and living with public health led restrictions has taken its toll on New Zealanders. At the same time, there has been a marked increase in sharing false and misleading information since the onset of the virus, which also erodes public confidence.
3. Social Cohesion is participation and belonging, underpinned by high public trust in government which in turn provides social licence. The OECD defines a cohesive society as one that works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward mobility¹. See Annexure 1 for the dimensions of social cohesion and factors contributing to breakdown.
4. MSD are currently leading a work stream on improving and fostering social cohesion. In New Zealand, agencies' social policies refer to five key characteristics of social cohesion²: belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition, and legitimacy. However, these characteristics in isolation could overlook the importance of creating and maintaining public trust and mitigating risks to social cohesion such as disinformation.
5. Declining social cohesion is a culmination of factors, some were pre-existing and have been exacerbated by COVID 19. It is important to also recognise the ongoing contention of Te Tiriti and the partially resolved grievances of many Māori resulting in a long-standing conflict and perception of threat to minority right. Low social cohesion can create parallel societies that inhabit different communications spaces, challenge credibility and legitimacy of government action and risk eventually undermining democracy.

¹ Sustaining Aotearoa New Zealand as a Cohesive Society. Sir Peter Gluckman, Dr Anne Bardsley, Professor Paul Spoonley, Dr Charles Royal, Naomi Simon-Kumar and Dr Andrew Chen. December 2021

² Ibid

6. Public support for the COVID-19 Public Health measures at the start of the response was 74%³. Noting the initial success of the elimination strategy as a team of 5 million, the country is now adapting to living with COVID-19 in the community and a high trust model. With the introduction of omicron and the change in public health measures, this has dropped to 64%⁴. The majority of New Zealanders continue to support public health measures but there is a communication challenge in combatting pandemic fatigue, change fatigue, and confusion.

Key risks to Social Cohesion in Aotearoa New Zealand in the COVID-19 environment.

Widening Social Disparity

7. Socioeconomic division and wealth inequality has been highlighted and exacerbated by COVID-19. Economic related factors diminished social cohesion include:
- Job insecurity - changing labour markets, precariousness of work because of self-isolation rules and businesses not being able to continue operating.
 - Economic grievances and expectations – growth in anxiety/anger about changes to the economy and labour markets.
 - Inequality of opportunity to access health, education.

This has fuelled a need for greater welfare support for the individual and for businesses, Care in the Community programmes, and additional funding for Maori and Pacific providers facilitating end-to-end support fits with local and regional models and needs.

Impacts of false and misleading information and online harms

8. There has been a significant increase in the spread of false and misleading information as the COVID-19 response has evolved. Many of the narratives around COVID-19 vaccines and the CPF are woven into larger themes centred around mistrust of authorities and international businesses and relate to concerns about side effects, safety and long-term effects of the vaccine and perceptions of COVID-19 restrictions. Many themes originate from outside New Zealand but are tailored to New Zealand audiences.
9. False and misleading information and online harms can be defined as follow:
- Misinformation:** Information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm. (e.g. a social media post that has been shared as it looks credible)
 - Disinformation:** Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country (e.g. Ideological and/or politically motivated extremism; deliberate campaigns to undermine public health etc.)
 - Mal-information** is information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country.
 - Online bullying** is when a person uses digital technology to send, post or publish content intended to cause harm to another person.
 - Distressing content** is content that is hateful, sexual material or illegal material (like age-restricted material or extreme violence).

³ News Talk ZB Poll reveals public's view on vaccine mandates <https://www.newstalkzb.co.nz/news/covid-19/covid-19-delta-poll-reveals-public-support-for-vaccine-mandates/>. Accessed 2nd March 2022 (Published Tue, 16 Nov 2021)

⁴ Stuff.co.nz. Parliament protest: New poll shows 30 per cent of Kiwis support anti-mandate protest <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/127808790/parliament-protest-new-poll-shows-30-per-cent-of-kiwis-support-antimandate-protest> Accessed 2nd March 2022

10. Most false information is spread by people who may not be aware that it is false, however, there are a small groups of people within New Zealand and overseas who actively share disinformation and seek to cause harm by threatening public safety, fracturing community cohesion and reduce trust in democracy. Refer to the mitigations table below current disinformation mitigation strategies.

International trends and influences

2. There are over 25 countries experiencing protesting related to COVID-19 including noncompliance to social health measures and economic loss, social inequities and negative treatment of health staff⁵. Digitalisation has reduced the importance of spatial boundaries between countries, and protestors may believe they have more in common with their online communities than their national community. The technology that we have used to keep people safe is being used in an increasingly coordinated way to enable disinformation to be spread. The impact and influence of the widespread protesting overseas has undoubtedly contributed to current situation in New Zealand, given the obvious comparisons between the convoy in Canada which impacted supply chains and brought Ottawa to a standstill and the domestic-convoy that has recently occupied Parliament lawn.
3. The implications of seeing other countries lift some or all restrictions and move to a semblance of 'pre COVID-19' is an inaccurate perception because they have been through widespread outbreaks. However, this influences the way New Zealanders feel about the stage of the COVID response we are currently in. It may contribute to feelings of restriction, fatigue and global isolation. The borders opening, may help reduce this feeling of isolation from the rest of the world. But there is still a perception that New Zealanders are excluded from what the rest of the world can do and that the rest of the world is moving on.

Proportionality of public health measures

“The global pandemic is a perfect human rights storm. The eye of the storm is striking a fair and reasonable balance between, on the one hand, the rights to life, healthcare, and health protection and, on the other hand, the rights to movement, work, education, and other human rights” – Paul Hunt, Chief Human Rights Commissioner⁶

4. Proportionality of public health measures in a rapidly changing pandemic landscape requires constant review. A disconnect between public health advice and decision making with the everyday experience of the public could be perceived as breaching human rights obligations (NZBORA). The public may perceive a greater feeling of safety in 2022 given vaccination levels and the relative mildness of the Omicron variant despite spreading easily. Issues include:
 - Fatigue to public health measures generally – less compliance to mandates such as scanning in.
 - Change fatigue - clarity of phases as they are continually refined causing stress and impact on businesses.
 - Different pandemic experiences between the regions – public health led restrictions may feel harsher where there are less active COVID-19 cases, or in isolated or rural communities.

⁵ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Global Protest Tracker. <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/interactive/protest-tracker/> Accessed 27th Feb 2022

⁶ Paul Hunt - Chief Human Rights Commissioner | Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/PaulHunthrc> Post from 12th February 2022.

- Ability to comply with public health measures – this may be due to accessibility to testing sites and/or Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs)
 - Compliance with self-isolation –
 - Businesses negatively impacted by COVID-19 may not be supportive of self-isolation requirements as this may result in difficulty staffing the business
 - Some workers may feel they cannot, due to financial reasons, self-isolate if they test positive for COVID-19.
 - Some parents may wish for their children to attend school, and not miss out on any further education, which may impact their compliance with self-isolation.
 - Perceptions of division
 - Restrictions based on public health recommendations require social license for the population to support. Policies that are emotionally charged such as child vaccinations, loss of employment due to vaccination status and accessibility to everyday activities are vulnerable to disinformation.
5. Collective responsibility is more important now the public is moving into phase 3, a high trust model. If we have lower social cohesion, the public may feel less community responsibility and could be more likely to act within their self-interests. The self-isolation guidelines are already impacting the ability to work, affecting the supply chain, hospitality and transport sectors and reducing access to education. Restricting some personal and individual freedoms is necessary to slow the spread of COVID-19 to protect vulnerable individuals and reduce impact on the health system.
6. An exacerbating factor to individualism over community responsibility is how many regions have experienced the pandemic differently, and this may contribute to the observed sentiment of COVID-19 fatigue⁷. Overall, 88% of people said they would self-isolate if they were **asked** to. Some of the issues relating to self-isolation however are; not enough space to isolate (57%), inability to take time off work (45%) and sharing a room with someone in house (44%)⁸. Auckland has the highest density especially in lower socioeconomic areas like South Auckland where crowded living is more prevalent⁹. A little over 10%¹⁰ of our population live rurally, not to allude they are unaffected by the restrictions, but geographically it is easier to self-isolate, not to wear a mask and not to require vaccine passes for everyday life¹¹. The regions are experiencing the pandemic differently and there is less imperative to be part of the whole.
7. Less adherence to self-isolation will result in the faster spread of COVID-19 and the impact will ultimately be felt by the health sector. Already during this outbreak, testing was overcapacity and our hospital systems are reaching capacity, Auckland is at 80.3%, Capital and Coast are at 90.3% and Canterbury is at 90.5%¹². There is a perception that government had 2 years to prepare the health sector, vaccinate the public and instil good

⁷ Family First New Zealand. Vaccine Mandate Poll February 2022 by Curia Research <http://familyfirst.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Vaccine-Poll-Results-February-2022.pdf> Accessed 25th February 2022

⁸ Attitudes to Self-Isolation February 2022 Final Report by Horizon Research

⁹ Stats NZ. Crowded housing highest among Pacific peoples <https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/crowded-housing-highest-among-pacific-peoples>. Accessed 2nd March 2022

¹⁰ Trading economics. New Zealand – Rural Population <https://tradingeconomics.com/new-zealand/rural-population-percent-of-total-population-wb-data.html>. Accessed 2nd March 2022

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Stuff.co.nz New Zealand's hospital and ICU beds in numbers, as Omicron cases rise <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/300530304/new-zealands-hospital-and-icu-beds-in-numbers-as-omicron-cases-rise> Accessed 2nd March 2022

public health practices so personal freedoms could return¹³. This perception of health sector being “underprepared” and there being less access to healthcare during a health response adds to distrust in government institutions, a salient factor for lowering social cohesion.

8. Across the regions, the health system has varied levels of regional capability, capacity and readiness. New Zealanders are being encouraged to travel domestically, and with Easter fast approaching, people may travel from a health care area that is better resourced, to an under resourced regional area. Tina Ngata, a Ngāti Porou scholar and advocate said “You’ve just spread it in our community, but you get the ICU bed?”¹⁴. Insecurity around access to healthcare resource contributes to lower social cohesion. We need to ensure that public feel the health sector is also being supported through the pandemic and therefore there is access to healthcare as a critical part of our response.

Key activities underway to address social cohesion for the COVID-19 response

Area	Agency Responsible	Mitigation	Comment
System Assurance Framework	DPMC	Monthly priority systems update and emerging strategic risks	Refer to the paper
COVID-19 Misinformation / Disinformation	DPMC’s COVID-19 Group has a leadership and coordination role working with government agencies in understanding the landscape and responding to COVID-19 false and misleading information. They convene a Working Group with key agencies. Individual agencies remain responsible for addressing false and misleading information issues	Support a whole of society approach Increase the public’s resilience to disinformation and online harms Promote credible information through effective communication Prevent the propagation of false and damaging content	Most false and misleading information is legal and there are therefore limited existing policy levers available to reduce the impact on the public and our democratic institutions.

¹³ Scoop News Health system unprepared for a Delta outbreak <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PA2109/S00026/health-system-unprepared-for-a-delta-outbreak.htm>. Accessed 3rd March 2022

and RNZ Hospital doctors say health system unprepared for new Covid plan <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/middayreport/audio/2018816377/hospital-doctors-say-health-system-unprepared-for-new-covid-plan> Accessed 3rd March 2022

¹⁴ Insecurity around access to healthcare resource contributes to lower social cohesion. The Spinoff. ‘The worry is being completely overwhelmed’: NZ regions brace for a Covid summer | <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/23-11-2021/the-worry-is-being-completely-overwhelmed-nz-regions-brace-for-a-covid-summer>. Accessed 2nd March 2022

	that relate to their specific portfolio areas.		
Communications and Engagements	DPMC Strategic Communications	<p>Develops and delivers public communication messages regarding the COVID-19 response, including the Unite Against COVID-19 campaign.</p> <p>Engages with COVID-19 response agencies regarding key messages for the public both nationally and regionally.</p>	<p>Social cohesion focus retaining trust and confidence</p> <p>Consideration of how to empower individuals in decision making and take individual ownership of health considerations.</p> <p>Engage with the public on the transparent and democratic processes in New Zealand relating to COVID-19.</p>
Reviewing public health measures in the context of Omicron, including the CPF	DPMC	<p>There is a policy review of health measures underway, including the CPF, with a report back planned for March.</p> <p>This will include a review of My Vaccine Pass and whether any amendments are recommended.</p> <p>The COVID-19 Strategic Public Health Advisory Group have been asked to provide advice on health measures.</p>	<p>The Human Rights Commission issued three briefings (published 24 Nov 2021) outlining conditions that need to be met for human rights and Te Tiriti in relation to the CPF and the use of CVCs. There is a light-touch piece of work underway by DPMC to seek evidence and assurance about what processes are in place to have met and continue to meet these conditions.</p>
Social Welfare support	MSD, TPK	Care in the Community programme and additional funding for Maori and Pacific providers facilitating end-to-end support.	Supports locally led response which fits with local and regional models and needs.

<p>Social Cohesion Work Programme</p>	<p>MSD</p>	<p>The development of a social cohesion strategic framework aims to promote a shared understanding of what social cohesion looks like and how it can be strengthened in Aotearoa New Zealand. This will help government, communities, the business sector and the cultural sector to align their efforts - together and in parallel to strengthen social cohesion.</p> <p>The strategic framework will include a measurement framework that we can use to track our progress and keep us accountable for achieving the change that we want to see. This work will also identify any gaps in the data we collect and how we can collect it.</p> <p>A proactive and committed work programme to strengthen social cohesion, which includes and builds on the actions that have already been agreed.</p>	<p>The implementation of the social cohesion strategic framework and support for communities, sectors and government agencies is Budget dependent.</p>
<p>Business Support</p>	<p>MBIE</p>	<p>The COVID-19 Support Payment (CSP) is a payment to help support viable and ongoing businesses or organisations which have experienced a 40% or more drop in revenue.</p>	
<p>Self isolation assistance for workers</p>	<p>MBIE</p>	<p>The Short-Term Absence Payment available to employers to pay workers who follow public health guidance. It's also available to eligible self-employed workers.</p>	

<p>Transparency of decisions</p>	<p>All agencies</p>	<p>Public trust and confidence is built through transparency of decisions.</p> <p>This is achieved through access to media, media stand ups, publishing papers, comms releases.</p>	<p>It is important that independent experts continue to provide commentary that both support and criticise the government’s response because it provides an insight into the balance between individual rights and collective wellbeing.</p>
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Future settings and challenges

- 9. The idea that removing CPF settings and public health mandates so that we can have a clean exit from the pandemic is unrealistic “The pandemic is like a doorway. Once you pass through, there is no going back”¹⁵. Providing stability in the future after an unpredictable time is multifaceted and extremely difficult. Clear communication, a shift to self-management and taking a more community-based approach given the differences in regions is likely to continue to be critical.
- 10. Addressing misinformation and disinformation requires exploring new and diverse approaches to mitigate the consequences of false information as part of a wider government approach. The current extent of our available policy levers is limited, and all public health messaging must compete in an already overcrowded COVID-19 information space. Building resilience and proactively addressing disinformation and online harms needs dedicated funding and a clear lead agency.
- 11. We have now moved to a high trust and self-monitored response, this provides an opportunity for community level initiatives that promote participation and inclusion with a strong equity lens, which in turn will hopefully help to build social cohesion.

Recommendations

- 12. I recommend the COVID-19 Chief Executive Board members:
 - a. **Note** that the paper is a high-level overview of the importance of social cohesion for the COVID-19 response.
 - b. **Note** Social Cohesion impacts and factors (Annex 1) should be considered when making policy recommendations.
 - c. **Note** that there are a number of work programmes underway which may help mitigate the social cohesion risk.
 - d. **Agree** to direct additional work if needed.

Prepared by: Jess Gray, Senior Advisor, System Assurance and Continuous Improvement

Approved by: Amber Bill
 Head of System Assurance and Continuous Improvement
 COVID-19 Group, DPMC

¹⁵ The economist “The New normal is already here. Get used to it.” Printed 18/12/2021

Appendix A – Dimension of Social Cohesion and Factors relating to its breakdown¹⁶

The dimensions of Social Cohesion

- trust and respect between those who are governed and the institutions and individuals they empower to govern them;
- trust and respect between all members of a society (which by inference reflects a diverse set of identities, worldviews, values, beliefs, and interests) to foster cooperation for the good of the society as a whole;
- Institutions and structures that promote trust and respect between all members of society; and allowing
- Belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition, and legitimacy to be universally possible.

The dimensions of the breakdown of social cohesion are the inverse of the bullet points above. Factors include:

Inequalities

Inequality of opportunity to access health, education
Inequalities on wealth/income resulting in greater socioeconomic divisions

Economic insecurity and perception of unfairness

Job insecurity - changing labour markets, precariousness of work because of self-isolation rules and businesses not being able to keep going.
Economic grievances and expectations – growth in anxiety/anger about changes to the economy and labour markets.

Information and public discourse

Changing role of traditional media – distrust in the fourth estate, choosing to act on feelings over reasoning/ logic / factual data.
Social media impacts – spreading of disinformation and misinformation.
Declining information reliability – overwhelm of information, uncertainty on the information given.

Social Boundaries and norms

Sense of collective responsibility – a more individual approach to the pandemic. Less shared values i.e. is public health importance versus economic importance.
Compliance with civic values – less respect for norms e.g. wearing a mask/scanning in.

Psychological states and stresses

Sense of personal security and safety – real threat of getting COVID-19.
Emotional and psychological stress – experience of lifestyle under the current framework; limited gatherings, working from home, self-isolating etc.

Trust in government institutions

Trust in a representative democracy – declining public trust in government accountability and integrity; perceived lack of voice.
Trust in government institutions – public trust in the agencies of central and local government, and that government will meet individual and community needs.

Inclusion and community

Perceptions of minorities – blame and stereotyping of ‘out groups’.
Strength of community groups – community support.
Sense of nationalism – ties in with the sense of collective responsibility and diminished sense of being in the pandemic together.

¹⁶ Sustaining Aotearoa New Zealand as a Cohesive Society. Sir Peter Gluckman, Dr Anne Bardsley, Professor Paul Spoonley, Dr Charles Royal, Naomi Simon-Kumar and Dr Andrew Chen. December 2021

From: [Charlie Sklenar \[DPMC\]](#)
To: [Rachel Lorimer](#); [Heather Peacocke \[DPMC\]](#); s9(2)(a) s9(2)(a) ; [Andrew Campbell](#); s9(2)(a) s9(2)(a) s9(2)(a) ; s9(2)(a) ; [Peter Abernethy](#); [^Health: Emma Blackmore](#); [Christine Ross](#); [^Police: Juli Clausen](#)
Cc: [^Health: Charmaine Ngarimu](#); [Louisa Rimmer](#); [Rachel Prince \[DPMC\]](#); [Sarah Wood \[DPMC\]](#); [Renee Wadsworth](#)
Subject: RE: FOR INPUT: Misinformation campaign [IN CONFIDENCE]
Date: Thursday, 3 March 2022 4:54:00 pm
Attachments: [image004.png](#)
[COVID-19 Disinformation and online harms - Communications Approach FINAL 25 Feb 22.pdf](#)

Rachel, I absolutely agree that this is an opportune time. Attached is the approved refreshed comms approach that underpins this work and feeds into a workplan.

The vaccine campaign work we did last year and tools that were developed for communities and the health sector are still a good foundation for addressing vaccine misinformation, however I agree that given the problem set has evolved significantly to wider COVID-19 and more anti-authority tone and online/offline harms (page 5 of the attached gives a visual of this) much of our comms is being refreshed to address this. It would be great to bring some additional horsepower to progress this work.

There are two phases we are looking at. Firstly the here and now – the next 4-6 weeks during a period of heightened anxiety with COVID-19 becoming very real after two years of anticipation, more people at home looking at the internet, the impacts of the protests and the escalating conflict (which may be overseas but is playing out on our screens at all hours). Secondly is the post Omicron period which we (UAC) are starting to look at in terms of social cohesion and the post Omicron future.

Here are the key short to medium term initiatives that are underway as part of the evolving workplan that follows on from the comms approach as part of an all of society response.

- Refresh of key message pack – underway.
- Regular engagement with community panel, Iwi Chairs forum and other government agencies and the Regional Leadership Groups to support community led initiatives.
- Increased work with other agencies on prevention of online harms and counter violent extremism as well as interconnecting with comms planning on the impacts of Russian disinformation given the Ukraine situation – meeting held today, led by NSG.
- Evolution of the tools that are currently available (final page of comms approach) – workshop planned over the next week.
- Procurement proposal underway to work with a third party provider to provide support, guidance and tools through workshops with Regional Leadership Groups.
- Working on a proposal to promote the voices experts (academics, scientists) in an engaging way on multiple channels that will reach those more vulnerable to misinformation and conspiracy theories.
- Workshop proposed with government social media leads with experts from Netsafe and platform specialists to manage inauthentic activity, harmful content and review processes.
- Initial meetings with marketing agency on campaign/activation options to reach those who are most vulnerable to misinformation to provide some balance/wider perspectives.
- Working with s9(2)(ba)(i) and NSG on a regular update to the system on key themes, media updates and tools available (lower classification than the bulletin)
- Working with s9(2)(ba)(i) and agencies on specific issues response – Worksafe, MBIE, MoH etc.

This is underpinned by further investment in research and open source monitoring which is currently going through the procurement process.

The more we can invest into society groups and organisations the better but this all requires resource and prioritisation alongside the health response. We have access to expertise who we can work with as we refine this work from social cohesion, behavioural and misinformation specialists. This includes contributing to initiatives like [The Whole Truth](#), [Dial it Down a Notch](#), [Aotearoa](#) and [Keep It Real Online](#)

While there is an operational working group to address COVID-19 disinformation, this is an opportune time to establish a comms focussed regular group as we develop expertise and outputs in dealing with mid and disinformation across key agencies given the increased threat this has to the response and beyond.

Ngā mihi

Charlie Sklenar
Principal Communications Advisor
COVID-19 Group

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

M s9(2)(a)

E s9(2)(a)



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Communications approach for COVID-19 disinformation, online harms and scams

V1.3 25 02 2021

Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa
New Zealand Government

Unite
against
COVID-19

 **MINISTRY OF
HEALTH**
MANATŪ HAUORA

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Context

Aotearoa New Zealand's response to COVID-19 has been one of the most successful in the world in preventing the spread of COVID-19. A significant factor in our success to date has been strong public trust and confidence in the response and effective use of communications. At the same time, there has been a marked increase in sharing false and misleading information since the onset of the virus. The technology that we have used to keep people safe is being used in an increasingly coordinated way to enable disinformation to be spread. The issue is not unique to New Zealand but requires a communications approach that both draws on international best practice and suits our unique context.

FALSENESS

INTENT TO HARM

Misinformation

Information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm

(eg a social media post that has been shared as it looks credible)

Disinformation

Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country

(e.g. Ideological and/or politically-motivated extremism; deliberate campaigns to undermine public health etc.)

Malinformation

Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organisation or country

(e.g. information leaked to cause reputational damage)

Scams

Schemes that attempt to gain personal information, usually for financial gain

Online harms

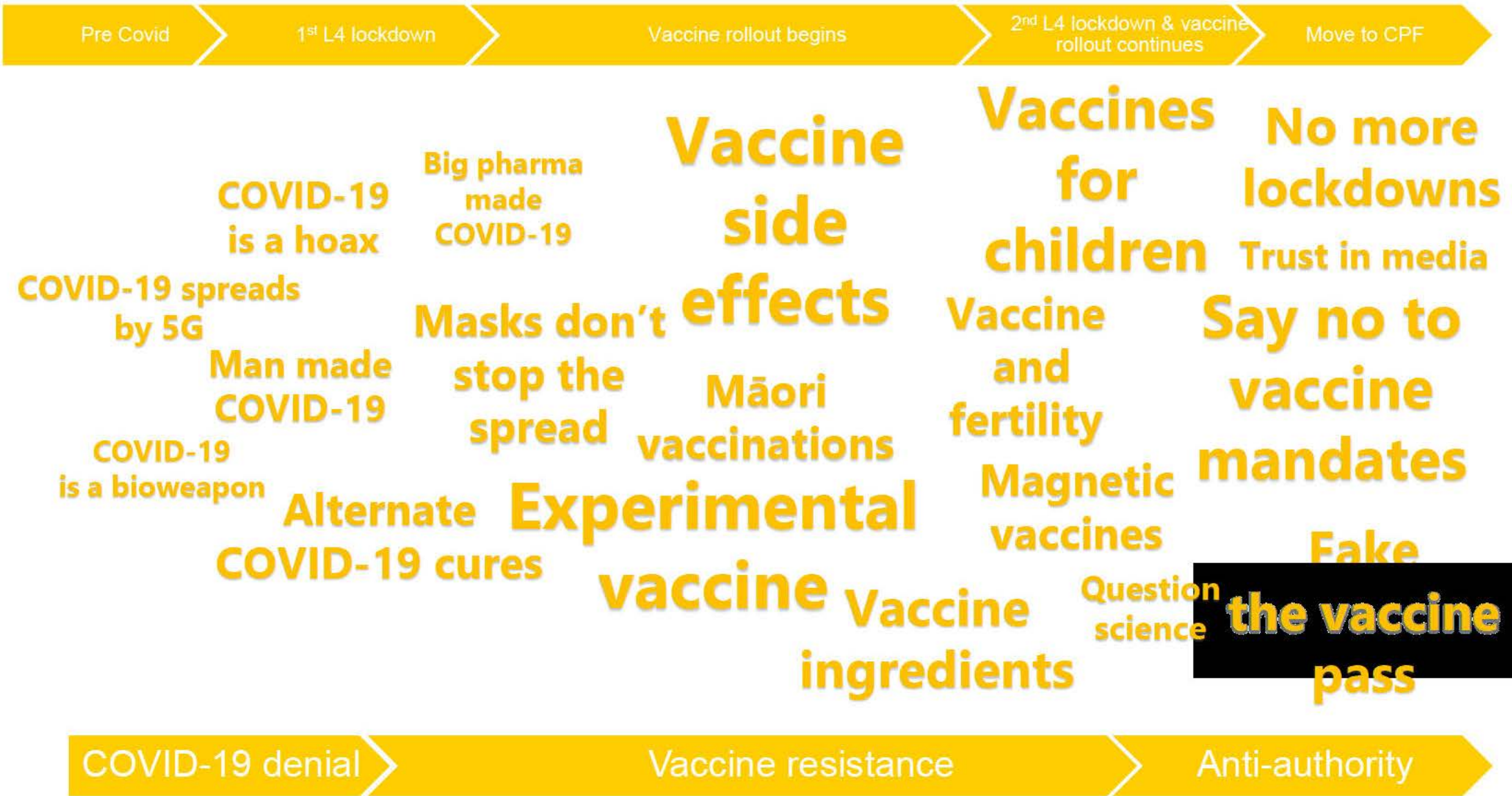
includes cyberbullying, extremist content, abuse of public figures and online manipulation

Use of terminology: misinformation is commonly used to cover the spectrum of false information (Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation) though disinformation is the primary focus due to the quantity and intent to cause harm.

Disinformation landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand

- The current COVID-19 narratives are **mostly related to vaccines** though there are emerging activities relating to the **COVID-19 Protection Framework (CPF)** including **My Vaccine Pass (MVP)** and **vaccine mandates**.
- Many of these narratives are woven into larger themes centred around mistrust of authorities and international businesses and relate to **concerns about side effects, safety and long-term effects of the vaccine** and **perceptions of COVID-19 restrictions**. Most themes originate from outside New Zealand but are often tailored to New Zealand audiences.
- While most misinformation is not spread intentionally, there are groups of people and organisations within New Zealand and overseas who **actively share disinformation** and seek to cause harm by **threatening public safety, fracturing community cohesion** and **reduce trust in democracy**.
- False information can be spread through **a range of different channels**, including social media, traditional media (television, radio and print), pamphlets, letterbox drops and word of mouth.
- Mainstream **social media platforms** (e.g. Facebook and YouTube) are the most common means of disseminating COVID-19 disinformation in Aotearoa though there is increasing use of alternate platforms to coordinate activity.
- There are increasing reports of spokespeople, government employees and frontline workers **targeted online and offline**.

Conceptual landscape of COVID19 disinformation narratives in Aotearoa



Insights and research

Our communication planning considers insights and research from the following sources to determine existing and emerging false information narratives:

- Research commissioned to understand public awareness and perceptions of vaccine to include misinformation specific questions
- Regular monitoring of our Unite Against COVID-19 and Ministry of Health social media channels
- Working with engagement leads within government agencies and the health sector to ensure feedback is provided from communities and groups on areas of concern
- Regular updates from international partners on their initiatives and emerging narratives
- Updates from research commissioned by government agencies that may be of significance to the COVID-19 response
- Research and landscape updates provided by academia
- Public reporting of potential false or misleading information via CERT NZ
- Media reporting in New Zealand and overseas



What is being done

- Support a whole of society approach
- Increase the public's resilience to disinformation and online harms
- Promote credible information through effective communication
- Prevent the propagation of false and damaging content



Freedom of expression and association

- Most mis/disinformation is legal.
- When addressing false information we must (and do) take into account New Zealanders' rights to freedom of expression and association.



Key considerations

- False information has emerged as a complex national security issue across the world.
- There are a number of potentially harmful effects from the spread of false or misleading information.
- These harms include a threat to public safety, incitement of criminal or violent extremist activity, breakdown of social cohesion, and reduction of democracy.
- We need a whole of society approach to build awareness and strengthen resilience.
- Everyone has a responsibility to prevent mis/disinformation.
- It's shouldn't be just a government voice involved in the discussion
- A whole of society approach means government, civil society, tech companies, media, academia, business and the public all have a role to play, from education, to communication, to public safety.

All of society role in responding and building resilience



Role of technology providers

- Government agencies engage regularly with major technology providers and platforms on issues of public safety and will continue to do so.
- Independent online safety organisations such as Netsafe also provide practical tools, support and advice for managing a range of online challenges.
- We need to ensure New Zealanders can safely make the most of the opportunities technology offers.



Role of media

- The media has a vital role in helping to combat false information
- They play an active role in determining what issues are important to the public.
- It is important that New Zealand's media is independent, trusted and robust.
- Information must be accessible across the cultural, religious and linguistic diversity of our communities.



Role of communities and the New Zealand public

- Elevate and promote credible voices within communities to respond and build resilience
- Learn about reliable sources of information and how disinformation is designed to undermine beliefs and values.
- Report information about COVID-19 or the vaccine that doesn't seem right. If it's on social media report it to the platform – anything else such as a pamphlet [report it to CERT NZ](#) or call 0800 2378 69.
- Possible crimes should be reported to the Police



Role of academia

- A strong voice on the effects of false information.
- Research on why false information is spread and how it can be countered
- Recommendations and evaluations on interventions
- Academic view on the disinformation landscape
- Unravelling the complex effects of false information on civil society

Role of government

- A range of government agencies are working to mitigate the consequences of false information.
- Our strategic communications approach focuses on providing readily available reliable information while building and strengthening resilience to false information.
- DPMC's National Security Group has a coordination role across government agencies working on strategic resilience to disinformation (beyond COVID-19).
- Response agencies are working to ensure that risks are understood.
- DPMC's COVID-19 Group has a leadership and coordination role working with government agencies in understanding the landscape and responding to COVID-19 false and misleading information.
- Individual agencies remain responsible for addressing false and misleading information issues that relate to their specific portfolio areas.
- Government cyber security agency CERT NZ is the central coordination point for any COVID-19 cyber security incidents and a public reporting point for false and misleading information.
- The Ministry of Health has established an operational focussed s9(2)(ba)(i)
[redacted] to respond to vaccine and health disinformation.
- COVID-19 Group and agencies are working jointly to assist in providing guidance and resources to the health sector, businesses and community leaders and the public on responding to COVID-19 false and misleading information.

Guiding communication and engagement principles



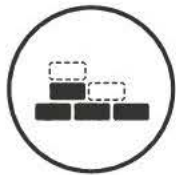
Insights and research

led communications planning that is agile to respond to changing false information narratives



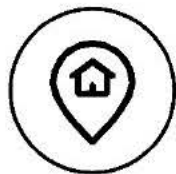
Work in partnership

with Māori in planning and delivery of communications and engagement



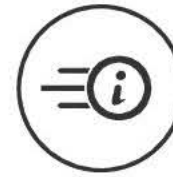
Build on existing trust foundations.

A government or reliable health voice may not work for all communities. Channel reliable information through voices they trust.

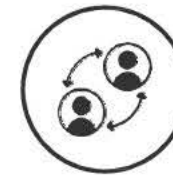


Localised, tailored and community focussed communications

while managing central integrity of messaging.



Rapid intervention to fill an information gap/provide an alternative to a dominant mis/disinformed narrative where appropriate.



Direct engagement that is respectful and culturally appropriate, encourages participation, and empowers through dialogue.



Inclusive approach that recognises audience diversity including language and accessibility needs and at each stage honours the Treaty of Waitangi



Media/social media engagement

to slow/stop the spread of false information

A Māori approach informed by manaakitanga



Mis/Disinformation is widespread among whānau - especially rangatahi – who have been particularly targeted and exposed to a wide range of damaging narratives that are mainly taking advantage of trust in media, science and or Government.

We recognise and acknowledge the historical and political landscape that Māori exist within, and the associated triggers that the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate.

We draw upon our connections and common ground, an approach informed by manaakitanga allows us to respectfully establish boundaries with whānau engaged in conspiracy theories while remaining digitally connected to one another.

Where we can and when safe, Kanohi ki te kanohi – face to face. This form of Māori led engagement promotes an open and authentic opportunity where people can directly address concerns in a local, safe environment with access to appropriate experts.

Communications response to COVID-19 disinformation

	Requirement	Channels	Tools
Short-term reactive	<p>The misinformation requires an immediate response. Rapid communications are required to rebut, correct or counter disinformation with the established facts. Pre-bunk emerging risks by exposing disinformation strategy.</p> <p>Led by agency affected</p>	<p>Prioritise media relations and face-to-face contact with trusted allies, journalists and researchers</p> <p>Activate network and stakeholders.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Press statement • Minister statement • Direct communications • Community leaders • Brief journalists • Q&A • Paid advertisement/ SEO <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weigh up resources and immediate threats to determine balance between counter-message, counter-narrative and crisis handling. Focus reactive efforts on public safety and assurance
Medium-term proactive	<p>The misinformation requires a considered response. Use a combination of communications to assert own values/ brands. Tie proactive measures with normal everyday communications and work with stakeholders/influencers to create consensus around the position.</p> <p>Led by COVID-19 Group and Ministry of Health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream media • Official COVID-19 channels • Stakeholders and influencers • All of society channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standalone campaigns • Community outreach, dialogue and engagement • Updated facts pages on web content • Key message availability • Targeted digital campaigns <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate network, stakeholders and influencers • Work with technology providers (i.e. social media platforms)
Long-term strategic	<p>The misinformation requires a coherent, sustained response to create long-term change. Develop and assert strategic narratives in relation to an issue by shaping the information space to promote position and deter others (raising the threshold).</p> <p>Led by National Security Group and COVID-19 Group</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple channels across society • International channels • Stakeholders and influencers • Social media platforms • All of society channels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Database of narratives • Publish regulatory responses • Multi stakeholder forum • Campaign, narrative and brand engagement • Programme funding e.g. for participatory content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencer and community leader support • Facilitate network, stakeholders and influencers • Workshops/training

Social media guidance to ensure reliable information is readily available



Covid19.govt.nz
New Zealand Government
Te Kaitiaki Take Kōwhiri



Covid19.govt.nz
New Zealand Government
Te Kaitiaki Take Kōwhiri



Covid19.govt.nz
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- Publish accurate, timely, reliable content consistently to ensure the community knows official channels to go to for credible information
- Regularly advise on how to look out for credible information, with reminders in content
- Don't name or repeat known misinformation but instead provide the correct information
- Robust community guidelines in place and made publicly available
- Provide support to government agencies supporting COVID-19 response to facilitate training and best practise
- If disinformation, harmful content or emerging themes are identified they are escalated for further review

The Ministry of Health has established a team to carry out the following tasks:

- Receive reporting, monitor and develop insights on evolving COVID-19 disinformation incidents and narratives
- Build a database and dashboard for reporting misinformation in Aotearoa and track emerging narratives that may mislead New Zealanders
- Carry out risk and impact analysis of the disinformation
- Support the delivery of tactical communications to counter or respond to disinformation and ensure that reliable information is widely available to all New Zealanders – this might include communications campaigns responding to misinformation hotspots, utilisation of digital marketing techniques to push appropriate information to identifiably vaccine hesitant areas, publicly calling out prominent items of misinformation.
- Act on disinformation through levers of government such as reporting illegal activity to Police, DIA online harms, regulatory bodies etc
- Track outcomes

COVID-19 disinformation – public communication messages

- Disinformation is a global problem and New Zealanders are not immune from this sort of activity and the potential for it to lead to harm. Since the start of the pandemic there has been a significant increase in coordinated disinformation circulating in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- This includes coordinated activity from people seeking to prevent New Zealanders from being vaccinated and undermining the response by sharing and promoting misleading and false information - often targeting New Zealand's most vulnerable communities.
- The most important thing we can do for our friends and whānau who might be targeted by disinformation, is to encourage access to credible information, and to promote where people can safely and reliably get this – whether online or in person.
- All New Zealanders have the right to freedom of expression, but this must be lawful and not impinge on the rights of others.
- Disinformation may risk people's safety, by undermining the importance of health measures, particularly for vulnerable people and those on the frontline working night and day to protect New Zealanders from COVID-19.
- New Zealanders are asked to consider carefully what they read and what they share. Something that may look genuine could be a few clicks from individuals or organisations whose intent could be harmful.

COVID-19 online harms and threatening behaviour – public communication messages

- Online harm content includes abusive and hurtful message, images or videos; repeated unwanted messages, spreading of gossip and lies; fake accounts used to humiliate or harass others.
- Friends and whānau who might be subjected to online harms - including bullying, abuse and harassment - are encouraged to report it the platform hosting it or to Netsafe.
- Harmful online content targeted at individuals, businesses and organisations, including media outlets, who promote the vaccine.
- If anyone is immediate danger, **call Police on 111 straight away.**
- Threatening behaviour towards anyone related to COVID-19 will not be tolerated. Acts of violence and attempts to be unlawful with an aim to disrupt or cause fear should be reported to the Police.

COVID 19 scams – public communication messages

Scammers look for ways to trick people into sharing their personal or financial details, especially via phone and email. Here's what you should know about the COVID-19 and the vaccine:

- You will never be asked to pay for the vaccine or pay to secure your place in the queue.
- Official information about the vaccine will come from a trusted provider of health content, such as the Ministry of Health, Unite Against COVID-19 or your District Health Board or health provider.
- A health worker will never come to your home to give you the vaccine, unless arranged with you beforehand.
- You will never be asked for personal information via text or email. If you see, it report it to CERT NZ and don't reply to the message.
- If you receive an email, phone call or SMS asking for financial details in regards to the vaccine pass, it will be a scam. Report it to CERT NZ immediately.
- If you see something about COVID-19 and the vaccine that doesn't seem right, report it to CERT NZ at <https://www.cert.govt.nz/covid-19-vaccine-scams/> or call 0800 2378 69.

Guidance for government officials talking about Disinformation

- Ensure transparency and freedom of expression are at the forefront of communications regarding our response to disinformation.
- When talking about disinformation, where possible the organisation/person who has initiated the information should not be promoted and the false information not reinforced.
- Scientific facts won't counter value-laden false information. Instead, bring common good values, necessary to collective public health action, to counter disinformation.
- Acknowledge the challenge of countering disinformation and the impact it has. Highlight the complexity of the disinformation landscape but connect this to concepts that the general public can relate to.
- Prepare the public that disinformation will be widely circulated as the COVID-19 response continues but we can all help to reduce the impact.
- Acknowledge that while many of us will have shared false information at some stage without realising, sharing incorrect information may put the health response at risk.

Resources toolkit to respond to disinformation and online harms

About misinformation and online safety

[covid19.govt.nz/misinformation and online harms](https://covid19.govt.nz/misinformation-and-online-harms)

[A Brief History of Misinformation animation](#)

[Guidance for health professionals and community leaders](#)

covid19.govt.nz/postersandvideos

keepitreasonline.govt.nz/

netsafe.org.nz/

Vaccine Facts (addresses key vaccine disinformation themes)

covid19.govt.nz/get-the-facts-about-covid-19-vaccination/

covid19.govt.nz/your-vaccine-questions-answered

