



## Proactive Release

The following document has been proactively released by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), on behalf of the Minister for COVID-19 Response, Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall:

### **COVID-19 Briefings - August 2022**

The following documents have been included in this release:

**Title of paper:** 01082022 Assurance of System readiness Work Underway to Respond to a Variant of Concern

**Title of paper:** 03082022 Insights from Recommendations across COVID-19 Response System Reviews

**Title of paper:** 05082022 Review of New Zealand's COVID-19 Protection Framework and self-isolation settings - 5 August

**Title of paper:** 05082022 Public awareness campaign to support people who are unable to wear masks

**Title of paper:** 08082022 Meeting with Strategic COVID-19 Public Health Advisory Group 10 August 2022

**Title of paper:** 12082022 Preparation for Release of Haumaruru Briefing

**Title of paper:** 25082022 Meeting with Prof. Michael Plank

**Title of paper:** 26082022 All of Government COVID-19 System Readiness Exercise

**Title of paper:** 30082022 COVID-19 Community Panel, Chair's Report

Some parts of this information release would not be appropriate to release and, if requested, would be withheld under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act). Where this is the case, the relevant section of the Act that would apply has been identified. Where information has been withheld, no public interest has been identified that would outweigh the reasons for withholding it.

### **Key to redaction codes:**

- Section 9(2)(a), to protect the privacy of individuals;
- 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)(h), to maintain legal professional privilege.



### All of Government COVID-19 System Readiness Exercise

<b>Date:</b>	26/08/2022	<b>Report No:</b>	DPMC-2022/23-40
		<b>Security Level:</b>	<del>IN CONFIDENCE</del>
		<b>Priority level:</b>	Medium

Action sought	
<b>Prime Minister, Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern</b>	<b>Note and agree recommendations by Friday 9 September 2022</b>
<b>Minister for COVID-19 Response, Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall</b>	<b>Note and agree recommendations by Friday 9 September 2022</b>

Name	Position	Telephone	1 <sup>st</sup> Contact
Ruth Fairhall	Deputy Chief Executive, COVID-19 Group, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	s9(2)(a)	
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Departments/agencies consulted on Briefing
Manatū Hauora Ministry of Health; Te Whatu Ora Health New Zealand; Border Executive Board; Customs New Zealand; Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment; Te Arawhiti: Office for Māori Crown Relations; New Zealand Treasury; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; National Emergency Management Agency; Ministry of Justice; New Zealand Police; Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission; Ministry of Transport; Department of Internal Affairs

#### Minister's Office

**Status:**

Signed

Withdrawn

**Comment for agency**

**Attachments:** Yes/No

# Briefing

## All of Government COVID-19 System Readiness Exercise

To: Prime Minister, Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern  
Minister for COVID-19 Response, Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall

Date	26/08/2022	Security Level	<del>IN CONFIDENCE</del>
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### Purpose

1. This briefing reports on the all of government exercise held on Tuesday 9 August 2022 to test system readiness to respond to a COVID-19 variant of concern [CAB-22-MIN-0223]. It outlines the main findings from the exercise including key areas identified for improvement to ensure the system remains ready to respond.

### Recommendations


We recommend you:

1. **note** that the system readiness exercise and briefing to Ministers was a result of Cabinet consideration of the paper COVID-19: Confirming New Zealand's Approach to Variants of Concern [CAB-22-MIN-0223 refers].
2. **note** that the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet facilitated an all of government COVID-19 system readiness exercise on 9 August 2022 that tested the current response system's readiness to respond to a variant with high clinical severity and high immune escape.
3. **note** the outcomes of the exercise include:
  - a) key points of contact refreshed and identified in agencies across the operational layers to deliver COVID-19 response measures.
  - b) agencies identified they have processes or plans in place where required to operationalise response measures or key points of contact have identified response measure plans that need updating.
4. **note** in context of the COVID-19 system transition, the exercise indicated that the transition of DPMC functions to health entities could proceed as agreed by Cabinet [CAB-22-MIN-0251].
5. **agree** that the Ministry of Health will undertake the first of regular system readiness exercises before December 2022 and a report on this will be provided to the Minister for COVID-19 Response.


YES/NO

- 6. **note** as advised to the Minister for COVID-19 Response [DPMC-2021/22-2446] agency participation in regular Ministry of Health-led readiness exercise could satisfy the requirement for regular reporting to COVID-19 Ministers on readiness from public sector Chief Executives [CAB-22-MIN-0223].
- 7. **agree** to proactively release this briefing on the Unite Against COVID-19 website.

YES/NO

  
**Ruth Fairhall**  
**Deputy Chief Executive**  
**COVID-19 Group, DPMC**  
25/8/2022

**Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern**  
**Prime Minister**  
.....

  
**Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall**  
**Minister for COVID-19 Response**  
7.9.22  
.....

## Background

1. On 13 June 2022 Cabinet confirmed New Zealand's approach to responding to a new COVID-19 variant of concern (VOC). It noted there was a possibility that a variant with high clinical severity and high immune escape may emerge. Cabinet noted that preceding any transition of functions from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) to health entities, an exercise will be undertaken to ensure system readiness to respond to a new VOC and a report on this will be provided to the Prime Minister and Minister for COVID-19 Response [CAB-22-MIN-0223].
2. The DPMC COVID-19 Group facilitated an all of government (AOG) COVID-19 system readiness exercise on 9 August 2022 based on a worst-case scenario of the emergence of a variant with high clinical severity and high immune escape.

## COVID-19 response system readiness exercise

3. The AOG response system has over the past three months developed a Catalogue of Response Measures. It specifies all the measures that have been used in New Zealand's COVID-19 response to date, the lead agency, time to implement and costs (economic, social, and otherwise) and enabling legislative mechanisms or frameworks. The DPMC COVID-19 Readiness and Response team convened a cross agency system readiness exercise to test the system's ability to reactivate or scale up response measures, including those that are not currently in use, in response to a new, more severe VOC.

### About the exercise

4. The AOG COVID-19 system readiness exercise (the exercise) was based on a scenario designed by the Ministry of Health (MOH) and derived from the VOC plan. The purpose of the exercise was to:
  - a) test the existing response system architecture as set out in the National Management Approach; and
  - b) ensure there is a clear understanding of the agency roles and responsibilities across the system to respond to a variant of concern with high clinical severity and high immune escape, including in respect of newly established health agencies' functions.
5. The Chair of the National Response Group (NRG) facilitated the exercise in a table-top format and included a mock NRG meeting as it is a key mechanism to operationalise Ministerial decisions, particularly those that require high levels of cross agency coordination and integration. Prior to the exercise, the Catalogue of Response Measures, the MOH scenario, and fiscal management guidance and approach to economic supports from the Treasury were sent out to attendees.
6. For the purposes of the exercise, 'readiness' was defined as the state of being fully prepared for an event. In the context of New Zealand's COVID-19 response, this meant facilitating a shared understanding across government agencies of what is required, the alignment of systems and processes, extracting lessons from the pandemic response thus far, and testing and enhancing response mechanisms in preparation for detection of a new VOC in New Zealand.
7. Attendees of the exercise were both participants and observers. Participants were largely members of the NRG which comprise of COVID-19 agency representatives who are the key points of contact to inform advice to decision-makers and operationalise decisions

during a response. Observers were invited to inform other work programmes and readiness exercises such as the update to the National Management Approach, management of foot and mouth disease, and the COVID-19 system transition. Attachment A lists attendees.

8. Following the exercise, the DPMC COVID-19 Group Readiness and Response team conducted one on one meetings with participating agencies to discuss the areas of improvement identified in the exercise to bolster system readiness.

#### **The scenario tested**

9. The scenario was based on one of the five hypothetical scenarios in the MOH VOC plan. It was the emergence of a variant with high clinical severity and high immune evasion, effectively the worst-case scenario.
10. The scenario simulated recommendations from the COVID-19 Protection Framework Assessment Committee (CAC) and the Director General of Health to exercise system wide activation of the most operationally complex measures:
  - a) imposing strict border restrictions and reactivation of Managed Isolation and Quarantine facilities.
  - b) restricting population movement by a lockdown of Auckland with a hard boundary in place, and
  - c) shifting the country to the Red setting of the COVID-19 Protection Framework.
11. The scenario did not test all response measures available to decision-makers. It exercised system wide activation of measures that would require a high level of system coordination and stakeholder engagement to be assured that the system is ready to respond or has identified areas for improvement.

#### **Findings**

12. The exercise confirmed that, similar to previous COVID-19 outbreaks, an outbreak of a VOC will require an AOG response and a range of agencies will play critical roles in service delivery and integration of policy and operational activities to support the response. It affirmed that there is a shared understanding across government agencies of what is required to respond to the worst-case scenario tested, and that although measures are challenging to operationalise, the systems, processes and relationships remain in place.
13. The exercise also affirmed that using the lessons from the pandemic response thus far are critical to informing readiness activities for a VOC. Agencies continue to reflect on these lessons to identify further work that could be undertaken to bolster system readiness or be incorporated into response measure activation in the future. For example, agencies noted the engagements with and communications to the regions via the Regional Leadership Groups were vital in representing a regional voice in central government. Maintaining this was recognised as an important consideration in responding to the scenario tested. ✓
14. The exercise demonstrated the value of the regular system readiness exercises previously led by the DPMC COVID-19 Group and the maintenance of a catalogue of response measures that outline agreed agency responsibilities for operationalising the measures.

15. Many agencies have devolved their COVID-19 teams or directorates to a more business as usual operating model. Despite the changes in structure and personnel, institutional memory in the system is retained and sufficient to enable a cross-agency response. For example, the exercise refreshed and confirmed key points of contact in agencies across the operational layers to deliver COVID-19 response measures or have processes and plans in place to operationalise response measures. Following the de-centralisation of all of government response coordination mechanisms currently held at the DPMC COVID-19 Group, it will remain important to maintain regular system readiness exercises.
16. The exercise was an opportunity for key points of contact from new health organisational structures (MOH Public Health Agency and Te Whatu Ora) to clarify for other agencies how they will coordinate across their entities to respond to the scenario tested. For example, exercise attendees understand that when an NRG meeting convenes, the Deputy Director General, Public Health Agency provides a situation update and the National Director, Public Health Service (Te Whatu Ora) provides a brief on the operational measures recommended by the CAC. The key points of contact have practised this coordination arrangement across health entities to deliver the Director General of Health and CAC advice on response measures to decision-makers alongside the DPMC COVID-19 Group system advice. These coordination arrangements in the health sector can be used to manage notification of, and provision of advice on, other communicable diseases. They may evolve as the organisational structures are finalised.
17. The exercise tested the system's ability to operationalise the most complex response measures, namely border restrictions and a localised lockdown, to anticipate and mitigate, to the extent possible, obstacles that could emerge if reactivation were required. In practice, these measures would be operationally complex and have timing challenges. However, exercising the system has been useful to anticipate the challenges that could emerge and mitigate them to the extent possible to support the Government's response to COVID-19, refer paragraph 23 below.
18. Across agencies it was acknowledged that should a concurrent event occur while operationalising the complex response measures tested, there would be compounding pressure on the system's ability to respond due to impacts on workforce and capability. Experience shows us each response required a varying level of resource surge to support implementation. Therefore, participants noted agencies must have robust Business Continuity Plans in place that do not rely on a limitless workforce.
19. It was noted that provision of coordinated and timely information regarding the response measures and requirements is critical to inform the development of sector guidance (e.g., Te Kawa Mataaho to the public sector workforce, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment to the business sector).
20. Following the exercise, it was clarified that to enable the lockdown response measure tested in the exercise, a new Order would need to be drafted depending on the particular measures needed in the circumstances. Officials will likely propose drawing on previous Orders such as the Alert Level Order as a tried and tested tool instead of drafting a new, untested order.
21. The exercise identified areas of improvement to bolster system readiness for the scenario and response measures tested and confirmed the lead agency. The most critical areas are:
  - a) Accountability for the self-quarantine model between the time at which the variant of concern is identified and standing up Managed Isolation and Quarantine

Facilities. As a result of the system readiness exercise, agencies have since agreed that Te Whatu Ora will be the lead.

- b) As part of system readiness planning, the Border Executive Board will consider the appropriate accountability for operationalising COVID-19 testing at the border.
- c) Supply chain impacts remain a risk to imposing border restrictions. Agencies would support Ministers to take decisions on management of supply chains through all of government Supply Chain Group chaired by the Ministry of Transport.
- d) Education providers have been helpful in past responses to communicate key information to communities. To ensure future responses are reactive to education providers, the Ministry of Education is now a member of the NRG, and membership will be reviewed on a regular basis or as needed depending on the characteristics of the response.
- e) Communicating aligned key messages that are targeted to communities and sectors is critical in responding to a variant of concern. As part of ongoing system readiness activities, communications teams across agencies meet regularly to ensure the right communication channels are in place and can be readily used in response to a VOC. The Ministry of Social Development and population agencies such as Te Puni Kōkiri, Ministry for Pacific Peoples, Whaikaha Ministry of Disabled Peoples, and Ministry for Ethnic Communities are involved in these discussions.

22. The exercise debriefs with agencies confirmed system readiness in key areas:

- a) The Quarantine and Isolation Capability readiness plan and numerous supporting plans (e.g., resource surge plan, health model of care, emergency evacuation accommodation) are in place, engagement with Iwi and partner representatives is ongoing. A team is in place to maintain and test the plan and mature it as required.
- b) New Zealand Customs Service is advanced in VOC planning given their key role at the international border and experience with COVID-19 response activity. The Comptroller and Chief Executive will soon approve a resurgence plan that includes how they would respond to a VOC that requires full or partial border restrictions and high levels of coordination across agencies and sectors at the air and sea border such as reactivation of pre departure testing.
- c) The Border Executive Board would coordinate across border agencies to operationalise border restrictions as required by the response scenario.
- d) The Care in the Community framework has readiness plans in place that can be scaled and pivoted in the scenario tested and depending on the characteristics of the VOC.
- e) Regional Leadership Groups and Regional Public Service Commissioners remain critical to operationalising response measures and ensuring the changes in policy settings are well-understood across the regions. The Ministry of Social Development is the lead agency on coordination of advice to and from the regions.
- f) Agencies are clear on roles and responsibilities to operationalise individual and business exemptions to cross boundaries under the lockdown response measure tested.



*Stakeholder engagement*

23. A theme of the exercise was that in operationalising response measures, maximising the time available for Ministers and officials to notify and engage with sectors will improve an AOG response.
24. The exercise identified that at a system level, a plan for external stakeholder engagement or notification is critical to develop at the onset of a response. <sup>s9(2)(g)(i)</sup>

25. The exercise identified that there is clear understanding of the stakeholder engagement required in operationalising the response measures tested, such as the Ministry of Transport leads engagement with the aviation sector companies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade leads on engagement with consular posts and diplomatic missions, and the Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment leads engagement with the business sector.

**Outcomes**

26. The exercise achieved its purpose and the COVID-19 response system is familiarised and practiced against the scenario tested. Outcomes of the exercise include:
- a) Key points of contact refreshed and identified in agencies across the operational layers to deliver COVID-19 response measures.
  - b) Agencies identified they have processes or plans in place where required to operationalise response measures or key points of contact have identified response measure plans need to be updated.
  - c) NRG membership contact details and distribution lists updated.
  - d) The catalogue of measures has been updated. Its future utility will be considered within a hazards and risks context broader than COVID-19.
27. These complex response measures tested have significant associated economic and social costs that Ministers would be supported to consider against each other, and balanced with the public health advice, before taking decisions. The measures also restrict some rights under the Bill of Rights Act. Taking decisions on the response measures tested would need to be considered within context and weighed among a balance of factors.
28. Particularly for the complex response measures tested, the exercise confirmed that it is critical the advice to decision-makers reflects a system perspective that is informed by a balance of health and non-health considerations. These decision-making factors include: the public attitudes toward the measures proposed, evidence of the impacts of the measures for at-risk populations, evidence of the effects of the measures on the economy and society more broadly, and the system's ability to operationalise the restrictions. At present, the DPMC COVID-19 Strategy and Policy team remain the coordinating

mechanism to advise decision-makers on the system and public health advice associated with the response options to support Ministers' decision-making.

29. The misinformation and disinformation landscape related to COVID-19 would also be a part of the advice to decision-makers as it informs consideration of public attitudes toward measures and the extent to which people and businesses understand, accept, and abide by them. At present, the DPMC COVID-19 Group is responsible for the strategic communications approach to addressing COVID-19 mis and disinformation, while the DPMC National Security Group is responsible for policy development relating to the response to mis and disinformation as part of a whole of society approach.
30. In context of the COVID-19 system transition, the exercise indicated that the transition of DPMC functions to health entities could proceed as agreed by Cabinet [CAB-22-MIN-0251].

### **Treaty of Waitangi considerations and engagement with Treaty partners**

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31. With respect to the COVID-19 response, engagement with Treaty partners is paramount to upholding the Crown's Treaty obligations. The Tribunal's Haumarū Report determined that with respect to the COVID-19 response the Crown's Treaty obligations are heightened due to the threat posed to the welfare and safety of Māori.
32. The exercise was informed by lessons from previous responses and acknowledged that engagement with Treaty partners in the scenario tested would need to occur as early as practicable. The Office for Māori Crown Relations: Te Arawhiti remains the overarching facilitator for engagement between iwi Māori and the Crown (with agencies of course able, and encouraged, to continue engaging with key contacts as appropriate).
33. Early in 2022, DPMC worked with Te Arawhiti to design a structured engagement mechanism to strengthen engagement with iwi Māori groups (the National Iwi Chairs Forum, iwi not affiliated to the NICF and Māori organisation representatives) on the COVID-19 response. The streamlined structure for engagement allowed for timely input into policy and decision-making processes and helped to ensure broad and inclusive engagement.
34. Following the peak of New Zealand's first Omicron wave in May 2022, and in acknowledgment of the shift to a more 'steady state' of pandemic management, the frequency of COVID-19 engagement hui was scaled back and meetings are now held on an as-needed basis.
35. The exercise determined that, in the scenario tested, Te Arawhiti would advocate that the streamlined structure developed early in 2022 should be re-instated to organise engagements between iwi Māori and the Crown. These engagements should focus on transmission of up-to-date information from the Crown to Māori, discussion of any 'on the ground' issues iwi Māori are seeing and may require support to resolve, and discussion of key policy issues.

### **Next steps**

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36. While this exercise tested current COVID-19 response system architecture, over the next three months, as agreed by Cabinet, functions currently delivered by DPMC COVID-19 Group will be transferred to the Ministry of Health before December 2022, including the system readiness and response coordination functions.
37. In context of the COVID-19 system transition and direction from Cabinet that agencies provide regular readiness assurance to Ministers, it is proposed that the Ministry of Health undertake the first of regular system readiness exercises before December 2022, and

following the transition of the system readiness and planning functions, and a report on this will be provided to the Minister for COVID-19 Response. The exercises would test the readiness of the system to integrate and provide system advice alongside health advice to decision-makers and through to taking a system approach to operationalising decisions.

**COVID-19 response system readiness exercise in context**

- 38. Cabinet directed a range of report backs from agencies between August and October 2022 regarding readiness to respond to a variant of concern [CAB-22-MIN-0223 refers]. These include that Public Sector Chief Executives provide regular progress reports for variant preparedness to COVID-19 Ministers. As advised to the Minister for COVID-19 Response [DPMC-2021/22-2446] agency participation in regular Ministry of Health-led readiness exercise could satisfy the requirement for regular reporting to COVID-19 Ministers on readiness from public sector Chief Executives.
- 39. As part of providing the Minister for COVID-19 response with readiness assurance, the COVID-19 weekly report includes progress updates from agencies on their report backs and readiness activities. Chief Executives across agencies remain apprised of their accountabilities regarding response measures, both those that are latent or active today as outlined in the Catalogue of Measures.

Attachments:	Title	Security classification
<b>Attachment A:</b>	Attendees of the All of Government COVID-19 system readiness exercise	<del>Unclassified</del>

**Attachment A: Attendees of the All of Government COVID-19 system readiness exercise**

Figures of attendance:

- There were 23 agencies represented at the readiness exercise with 33 participants and 25 observers.

Agency	Role
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet	Facilitator
Ministry of Health	Participant
Health New Zealand	Participant
Border Executive Board	Observer
New Zealand Customs Service	Participant
Housing and Urban Development	Participant
Inland Revenue Department	Participant
Managed Isolation and Quarantine	Participant
Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment	Participant
Ministry of Education	Participant
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade	Participant
Ministry of Justice	Participant
Ministry for Primary Industries	Participant
Ministry for Pacific People	Participant
Ministry of Social Development	Participant
Ministry of Transport	Participant
National Emergency Management Agency	Participant
New Zealand Defence Force	Participant
New Zealand Police	Participant
Parliamentary Counsel Office	Observer
Public Service Commission	Participant
Te Arawhiti: Office for Māori Crown Relations	Participant
The Treasury	Participant
Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People	Participant