



Summary

Co-ordination of the all-of-government response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020

We decided that it was important to take an independent look at what happened during the Covid-19 response in 2020 to understand how officials identified and implemented improvements as it developed, and the lessons from the response that might help New Zealand better prepare for future crises.

Although we focused on what took place in 2020, we also looked at New Zealand's pre-existing emergency management and pandemic preparations, its general state of readiness for a pandemic before Covid-19, and some of the improvements to readiness and response arrangements that were carried out in 2021 before and when the Delta and Omicron variants arrived.

What we found

Many public servants worked extraordinary hours in extraordinary circumstances to help keep New Zealanders safe and to mitigate the pandemic's other impacts. Officials were resourceful and showed initiative. They faced a complex task, prolonged uncertainty, and constant pressure. The ability of public servants to work together under significant stress was, and continues to be, critical to the success of the response.

However, work to prepare New Zealand for the next wave of Covid-19, or other disruptive events, must consider how to manage an extended response in a more sustainable way. We cannot just rely on good people. We need a better level of overall preparedness.

New Zealand could have – and should have – been better prepared

Some of New Zealand's national security, emergency management, and health system arrangements were not suitable for dealing with the specific characteristics of Covid-19. Before the emergence of Covid-19, there were pandemic-related plans in place, but some documents were outdated and confusing, and many people told us that there was not enough practical guidance on how to implement the plans. No central mechanism ensured that agencies had developed, co-ordinated, or regularly updated pandemic plans.

Recommendations from previous reviews of how prepared New Zealand was for a public health emergency (including pandemic simulation exercises) had not been fully implemented.



Many people working in the all-of-government response to the Covid-19 pandemic, including senior officials, had limited understanding of pre-existing emergency management arrangements. Governance of nationally significant risks, including pandemics, needed improvements.

Officials had to keep adjusting the Covid-19 response

Officials used the New Zealand Influenza Pandemic Plan and Co-ordinated Incident Management System framework as starting points for responding to Covid-19. They quickly adapted arrangements as they judged necessary – for example, changes were made to how the lead agency approach for responding to emergencies was used, and officials set up new structures to manage the response.

These arrangements were largely effective. However, they were not designed to be enduring, and contributed to confusion and tensions between agencies. There were some gaps and duplication. These took time to resolve. Co-ordinating information and advice was often challenging.

Changes to ways of operating were not always well communicated to people involved in the response, and many considered that the arrangements were complex. One review found that “agencies felt that the system was complicated to the point where they could not draw it”.

Although officials made efforts to continually enhance the response, for much of 2020 there were no consistent systems or processes for managing cross-agency risks to the response. Processes for routinely identifying, documenting, and implementing improvements were unclear.

New Zealand was better prepared for outbreaks of Covid-19 by the end of 2020

In December 2020, Cabinet approved longer-term arrangements to provide a more structured and sustainably resourced system response to Covid-19. These arrangements were designed to be less reactive and established clearer roles, responsibilities, and ways of working.

Cabinet also gave the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) a formal mandate to lead the co-ordination of the all-of-government response. DPMC had in effect been doing this since March 2020. However, the formal mandate provided additional clarity.

Steps were also taken to improve assurance. These included setting up a Covid-19 Chief Executives’ Board and plans to include a continuous improvement function in DPMC’s Covid-19 Group.

These decisions, along with improved planning for resurgence of Covid-19, meant that New Zealand was better prepared for further Covid-19 outbreaks by the end of 2020. However, the outbreaks of Delta and Omicron in 2021 underscored the continued need for good governance, effective mechanisms for testing preparedness, and for making ongoing improvements in a timely way.

Covid-19 is a wake-up call

In our view, the Government must demonstrate that it is taking action to avoid what the World Health Organization warns all countries against – a cycle of “panic then forget” when it comes to responding to emergencies.

DPMC told us in July 2022 that it expects the Covid-19 Group’s involvement in the Covid-19 response to reduce over time, as the all-of-government response system moves to a decentralised governance and operating model.

New Zealanders need assurance that regularly reviewed strategies and plans are in place to deal with these types of events. Plans should be regularly tested to ensure that they are suitable, particularly for events of the scale and complexity of a global pandemic. Implementation of improvements should be monitored and reported to the public.

In our view, the public sector needs a much greater focus on risk reduction and preparedness. This involves, among other things, ensuring that appropriate risk assessment and mitigations are used.

The public sector also needs to engage more with the public about emergency management. This includes listening to the public’s views and expectations and testing the public’s appetite for risk. We note that DPMC has started to promote these types of conversations as part of its current work looking at long-term national security risks.

None of this will happen without deliberate and sustained focus, strong leadership, and appropriate investment. Changes must be prioritised to ensure that we are prepared for the next major emergency or crisis. We know that this will occur – even if we do not know when or what it will be.