

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19 Lessons Learned



New Zealand Council Of
Christian Social Services

April 2025

Tirohanga Whānui | Overview

The New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on key decisions made by the New Zealand Government in 2021 and 2022 in relation to vaccines, lockdowns, testing and tracing technologies, and public health materials, as well as how pandemics should be responded to in the future. The below provides additional content based on feedback from our membership relevant to these points. The majority of our feedback has already been captured in our previous submission to Te Tira Ārai Urutā | NZ Royal Commission in March 2023: <https://nzccss.org.nz/submission/covid-19-lessons-learned/>.

NZCCSS members played a critical role in supporting New Zealand through the pandemic including delivering food parcels, caring for older people, delivering addiction services and supporting those in emergency and transitional housing. They were on the frontline and their feedback offers a valuable insight into the implementation of COVID related government decisions and where positive changes can be made in future.

Cross-cutting themes on COVID-19 pandemic experiences

Effective and agile coordination across government and beyond

Reflecting on the response to COVID, there was consistent positive feedback from NZCCSS members about silos within government being broken down in order to focus on the needs and outcomes of communities. This allowed government to be more agile in responding to issues as they arose and reflected a willingness for agencies to work together. This was received positively by the community sector as it allowed progress to be made at pace and helped to foster positive relationships with the sector that weren't hindered by agency-based barriers.

Regular and clear communication and direction was essential

The daily media briefings by the Prime Minister and lead health officials were seen as a positive and effective way to communicate and keep people up to date with critical information. This direct and proactive approach to communication from New Zealand leadership was also an important exemplar for organisations to follow in how to communicate internally with their own staff. Clear and comprehensive information was particularly important as more complex government decisions were rolled out, however while some appreciated the material provided, others felt more communication including channels for inquiries would have been beneficial. This was particularly notable as the pandemic progressed, with some members feeling that the staged rollout and rapidly changing policies lost some of the logic and was difficult to manage and to communicate to staff.

Surviving a pandemic is about more than just staying alive

While there is no dispute about the importance of saving lives and the effectiveness of New Zealand's response, some of our members acknowledge the difficulty of balancing survival with living well. One of our members noted many of the outcomes sought through decisions which felt driven by fear. Members noted concerns around isolation and social disconnectedness that many people experienced. This was particularly heightened for aged care facilities where they dealt with the challenge of residents experiencing the end of their lives within the restrictions of the pandemic. They outlined that the wellbeing of the dying person and their family was compromised by restrictions, yet there was no capacity for exemptions.

Lockdowns

The Community Sector showed leadership and adaptability

The NZCCSS membership overall showed an incredible adaptability to the lockdown that enabled them to respond quickly to the needs in their local communities. Organisations acknowledged the adaptability of their staff and people being willing and able to take on new tasks as needed. This reflects the specific knowledge that the community sector holds to be able to respond so quickly to the needs in their communities, as well as the dedication of the staff within the sector. An example of this was one organisation utilising premises previously used for church purposes to be food warehousing and packing to support food parcel delivery. The community sector was also uniquely placed to respond to differing cultural experiences and needs of the pandemic and to reach people that government wasn't able to.

Strong relationships and high trust between government and community enabled fast and responsive delivery of support

Building on the positive feedback on breaking down silos as noted above, the high trust relationships between government and community sector was particularly beneficial during the lockdown. The leadership and adaptiveness shown by community was felt by members to be well supported by government agencies and allowed community organisations to prove their capability. One example of this was a housing provider who was able to start providing housing for those on the street immediately after lockdown started, before a formal contract was in place, due to a high trust arrangement with government. The loss of this arrangement was noted by multiple organisations, as well as the limits that returning to previous arrangements placed on them as we moved away from the COVID crisis point.

Vaccines

There were challenges in implementing a vaccine mandate

NZCCSS agrees that the vaccine mandates were an important part of the government pandemic response to keep New Zealanders safe. However, there were some challenges in implementation. For some organisations this came with clashes in belief systems with individual staff members, as well as in communities. The reduction of social cohesion and difficulty engaging with those who were against the mandates was a major challenge noted by some organisations that has continued to impact social unity in New Zealand. The blanket approach to vaccines was also found to impact the quality of life for older people in aged care facilities or villages.

However, Vaccine passports were given as an example of a tool that was clear and easy to implement.

Staffing vaccine requirements was also complex for organisations to implement. For some organisations, the lack of a mandate placed a difficult decision burden on them about how to approach vaccine requirements if working with the public. For others that did have mandates, there were employment tensions between staff and challenges in pivoting people who were not vaccinated to non-client roles. This was particularly difficult for smaller organisations, or those with a specialised frontline workforce who could not easily pivot staff into non-contact roles.

Testing and tracing and public health materials

Most members found public health materials accessible

Feedback from NZCCSS members was mostly positive around access to public health materials. For many these were able to be distributed across their networks. This was well received by frontline services who were able to provide them to cohorts who may be more vulnerable to COVID or have difficulty paying for public health protections. However, for some access to RAT tests was difficult. Use of public health materials for protection such as masks was taken up well by staff, however there were examples of members of the public not wanting to adhere to requirements, putting additional stresses on staff trying to ensure compliance.

Taunakitanga | Recommendations

More flexibility could be beneficial for those at the end of life

As noted earlier, a challenge faced particularly by the aged care sector was supporting those at the end of their life who were also dealing with social isolation and a drop in their quality of life due to pandemic restrictions. This is undoubtedly an incredible challenging environment to make decisions for public health leaders. NZCCSS believes an important consideration for future pandemics would be whether flexibility can be given to the rules when people are at the end of their lives and to explore providing more choices for them and their whanau.

Lessons learnt through the pandemic can benefit New Zealand beyond future pandemic responses

NZCCSS members consistently reiterated the benefits of positive changes during the pandemic response that enabled them to serve their communities better, such as flexibility in service delivery, high trust with government, more coordinated government agencies and proactive communication. Many organisations also noted changes they have made internally following the flexibility that they realised was possible during the pandemic. These included a 4-day work week and flexible or remote working. The pandemic highlighted the innovation and flexibility to respond to people's needs when that is prioritised. For example, it showed as a country that we can essentially eliminate rough sleeping. We strongly recommend as the NZ Royal Commission brings together the lessons learned from the pandemic that these are not only used to inform future pandemic responses but are also used to consider how we can operate more effectively across government and community and support our communities in everyday life.

Communication to be prioritised in a pandemic response

As noted earlier, NZCCSS members highlighted the benefits of clear and regular communication received during the COVID pandemic. We recommend this continue to be prioritised in future pandemic responses. It was also noted by some members that more support would have been beneficial during the rollout of more complex policies or to respond to specific audiences. For

example, specific contact people or phone lines to respond to queries that were outside the standard frequently asked questions, or were targeted to specific cohorts. We recommend further consideration be given in future for building on the positive communication of the COVID response.

Supporting the wellbeing of communities is essential in getting through a pandemic

The Governments COVID pandemic approach responded well to the immediate and essential needs of New Zealanders. As the pandemic progressed, the mental health and psychosocial needs of communities grew, however NZCCSS members noted that many of these needs went unmet. This highlights the importance of future pandemic responses factoring in the broader needs of New Zealanders to support people mentally and socially through pandemics and other major events. Recognising the role of stress, isolation, anxiety and other mental and social stressors on people's wellbeing is an important factor to build into future pandemic responses to provide more holistic supports.

Ko wai tātou | Who we are

NZCCSS has six foundation members; the Anglican Care Network, Baptist Churches of New Zealand, Catholic Social Services, Presbyterian Support and the Methodist and Salvation Army Churches.

Through this membership, NZCCSS represents over 100 organisations providing a range of social support services across Aotearoa. Our mission is to call forth a just and compassionate society for Aotearoa, through our commitment to our faith and Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Further details on NZCCSS can be found on our website - www.nzccss.org.nz.

Ingoa whakapā | Contact Name

Alicia Sudden ceo@nzccss.org.nz