

(Roche et al., 2020)
[20 Apr 2020]

16 July 2020

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Health
Parliament Building
Wellington
New Zealand

Dear Minister

Contract Tracing Assurance Committee (CTAC)

The Contact Tracing Assurance Committee was appointed on 6 May 2020 to undertake a number of tasks with the objective of providing assurance to your predecessor that the recommendations of the Verrall Report had been implemented. We were also asked to identify any other emerging risks and/or issues that arose through our review.

The bulk of the work was undertaken in the period of late May and early June with an initial interim report prepared and presented, in draft, to your predecessor.

Given the then rapidly changing events as issues around the border quarantine processes arose together with the ongoing efforts of the Ministry regarding the Verrall Report recommendations, the Minister at the time asked that we update the recommendations and observations set out in the Interim Report. A further update on progress within the Ministry was undertaken on Thursday 9 July 2020. Given the time frames and other timing pressures three members of the Committee (Liz Read, Dr Marion Poore and Warren Moetara) were unable to attend the meetings. They have subsequently reviewed the work undertaken and contributed to the finalisation of the report.

As a result, the report has been completed in two parts:

- A Final Report dated 16 July 2020 (refer to Appendix A) which updates our earlier conclusions and recommendations; and
- An Interim Report and accompanying draft cover letter dated 12 June 2020 (refer to Appendix B) which sets out the observations that we thought required the attention of the Ministry of Health.

Set out in the attached appendices are a range of observations that the Committee believes merit the ongoing attention of the Ministry of Health and the wider Public Sector.

A key point to note is that considerable progress has been made by the Ministry of Health with respect to the implementation of the Verrall Report. New Zealand is in an increasingly strong position as a result of that effort. The Ministry is to be commended, given the multiple pressures the staff have been under.

Further optimisation is now the goal and it is clear that the systems adopted by the Ministry will continue to evolve as learnings occur within the New Zealand and global environments. New Zealand can have a highly effective and deployable contact tracing system that is capable of retaining the confidence and trust of key stakeholders.

The work undertaken by the Ministry to respond to and implement the Verrall Report has been largely completed. The foundations are in place and this represents a critical first step to support the preparedness to respond. Going forward, assurance and proof of the ability to deploy and respond will facilitate optimisation. This involves stress-testing and scenario planning of a range of probable outcomes. Once these have been completed, they will provide a high level of assurance to you as Minister as to the system's ability to be deployed and be successful.

A well-functioning, well-informed and integrated contact tracing process is a critical element of any response. This outcome will continue to be a core element of the ability to retain the confidence and trust of the general public and key stakeholders.

The contact tracing system is core to our level of preparedness. Its resourcing, leadership and ability to access high quality, accurate information with respect to the movements and contacts of individual members of the public is an ongoing challenge which must continue to be addressed.

In the view of the Committee there is an urgent need to focus on the following areas:

- **Scenario planning and stress-testing of the system** along with a full risk register are required. Having a newly designed and implemented system is encouraging but until it has been stressed-tested and amended/modified as required there are ongoing risks of failure. Scenario planning and stress-testing were recommended by the Allen + Clarke report and the Committee (through discussions) in May. The Ministry is planning to undertake this exercise in late July and again in August.

In keeping with the need for a whole of system approach to COVID-19, contact tracing capacity should be seen and framed within the context of the overall management of an outbreak, should one occur. As such, scenario planning will need to include an integrated approach to the use of the tools available – including clear leadership and role allocation, strategic testing, regional alert level changes, travel restrictions to and from the affected region/city and contact tracing.

Scenario planning, stress-testing and the development of a risk register as outlined above are normal within response-type systems such as Fire and Emergency, Bio-Security and Police operations. A response to a COVID-19 outbreak has many of the same characteristics.

- **Clarity of accountabilities and decision rights** within the three core interventions around border controls, testing and contact tracing require ongoing work. The operating environment is dynamic and the processes and associated accountabilities need to reflect that. Clarity on the command and control structure is critical. Recent events at the border have highlighted the need for clarity in this area.

Specifically with respect to an outbreak of COVID-19, it is important that the command and control structure and decision-making rights are transparent and understood by all those likely to be involved in a response. Management of a potentially fast-moving outbreak should be led by an appointed person with training in public health and outbreaks of infectious diseases who has the authority to act quickly using all the tools available, with the involvement and confidence of Cabinet and the Director-General of Health.

- **The role of technology to support contract tracing** is a fundamental enabler of a high quality and responsive system. Ongoing effort is required to simplify and make more useable the current App, together with clarifying the role of other technologies such as the Bluetooth Card and/or other improvements made by Google and Apple. Having readily accessible high-quality information is critical to success irrespective of its source. Making it easy for the public to record information is an ongoing task made more challenging by the lack of what many see as