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COVID-19 Inquiry released



HON SIMEON BROWN(/MINISTER/HON-SIMEON-BROWN)

Health (/portfolio/nationalactnew-zealand-first-coalition-government-2023-2026/health)

The final report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19 has been released today, delivering an independent account of the pandemic response and its lasting impact on New Zealanders, Health Minister Simeon Brown says.

"New Zealanders lived through one of the most significant global public health and economic events. They made real sacrifices, and this report is an important step in understanding the impact of the decisions that were made and how we can learn from them," Mr Brown says.

Key findings from the Royal Commission include:

- **Restrictions were initially balanced, then went too far:** COVID-19 restrictions were initially balanced and appropriate but extended beyond what public health advice recommended as the response continued.
- **Economic warnings were not heeded:** Treasury advised from the outset that pandemic spending should be timely, temporary, and targeted. The \$60 billion COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund spanned 821 programmes, around half of which were unrelated to the pandemic. The Commission found that many investments, including shovel-ready projects, did not meet those tests. The spending that followed drove up house prices and the cost of living for New Zealanders.
- **Public debt has left New Zealand exposed:** The Royal Commission has made it clear that the debt accumulated during the pandemic has left New Zealand with less flexibility to respond to future economic shocks, and that prudent fiscal management is required to rebuild those economic buffers.

- **Opportunities to do better were missed:** Many opportunities to improve economic decision-making were missed throughout the response, with high-level data failing to capture what was happening on the ground for ordinary New Zealanders.
- **Auckland's lockdown went longer than advice recommended:** Auckland was kept in lockdown and separated from the rest of the country for longer than what officials advised was necessary. A former Minister has since acknowledged that the public health benefits of lockdowns did not emphatically outweigh the costs by the end of 2021, despite Auckland and parts of Northland and Waikato being kept in lockdown.
- **Vaccine mandate advice for under-18s was not made sufficiently clear:** Former Ministers were informed of advice against applying a two-dose vaccine mandates to 12-17 year olds due to myocarditis risks. The two-dose vaccine mandate remained, which did not align with this advice.

"New Zealanders supported the initial 2020 response. Communities came together and made sacrifices, and it protected New Zealanders' lives. But the Commission has also found that restrictions continued longer than public health advice recommended, and that the economic costs were not given sufficient weight alongside the health response.

"New Zealanders remember what that period felt like – not being able to visit loved ones in hospital, struggling to get home from overseas, and keeping children home from school for months.

"Aucklanders experienced this more than most, spending more than six months in lockdown, the longest lockdown of any region in the country, separated from family and missing some of life's most important moments.

"The report also found that the cost of living pressures New Zealanders are still feeling today – and the ongoing lack of social cohesion for some – are part of that story.

"New Zealanders made enormous sacrifices and placed enormous trust in their government. We owe it to them to understand what happened and learn from it."

P The Government is carefully reviewing the Commission's findings and expects to outline its response to the recommendations by July, ensuring any future decisions balance the health and economic needs of all New Zealanders.



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