



18 July 2022

Harold
fyi-request-19522-09380686@requests.fyi.org.nz

Ref: OIA-2021/22-1386

Dear Harold

Official Information Act request relating to COVID-19 false information reporting cell

Thank you for your Official Information Act 1982 (the Act) request received on 31 May 2022. You requested:

A report recently proactively released on the Unite Against COVID-19 website refers to an inter-agency group providing reporting on COVID-19 false information:

*The report can be viewed here (quote on page 9):
<https://covid19.govt.nz/assets/Proactive-Releases/Reviews-and-audits/26-May-2022/COVID-19-Response-Weekly-Report-17-December-2021.pdf>*

On the topic of this “cell” I would like to request the following:

- 1) A copy of all of the “first report to Ministers” referred to above*
- 2) Copies of all subsequent reports to Ministers in this series*
- 3) If the cell has a set of terms of reference and/or an operating model, I would like to request copies of them”*

The timeframe for responding to your request was extended under section 15A of the Act by 20 working days because consultations were needed before a decision could be made on the request. Following this extension, I am now in a position to respond.

In December 2021 an Inter-agency Working Group convened by DPMC established a trial process (the virtual triaging and reporting cell) to ensure that information on less-than-criminal threats to the COVID-19 response was properly assessed, shared and reported to decision makers in a consolidated manner. As New Zealand’s COVID-19 mitigation measures evolved, in early March 2022 the need for the virtual cell was reassessed by government agencies and it was decided to revert to agencies providing assessments in their respective areas of responsibility. While it was active, the cell produced two reports.

In response to question 1 of your request, I have decided to withhold in full a copy of the report under section 6(a) of the Act (to protect the security or defence of New Zealand or the international relations of the Government of New Zealand). In response to question 2 of your request, as noted above there is one further report in scope of your request. I have also decided to withhold this report in full under section 6(a).

In response to question 3 of your request, an early draft terms of reference was created. However, it was not finalised due to the decision to cease the virtual cell’s activities. Therefore, I have decided to withhold in full a copy of the ‘[DRAFT] Virtual triaging and reporting cell: COVID-related mis/disinformation and risks to the COVID-19 response – Terms of Reference.’ This document is withheld under section 9(2)(g)(i) of the Act (to

maintain the effective conduct of public affairs through the free and frank expression of opinion).

In making my decision, I have taken the public interest considerations in section 9(1) of the Act into account.

You have the right to ask the Ombudsman to investigate and review my decision under section 28(3) of the Act.

We do not intend to publish this response on the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's website.

Yours sincerely

Dan Eaton
**Acting Deputy Chief Executive
National Security Group**