



Aide-Mémoire

Meeting with the COVID-19 Independent Continuous Review, Improvement and Advice Group

To:	Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall Associate Minister for COVID-19 Response		
From:	Amber Bill, Head of System Assurance & Continuous Improvement	Date:	21/03/2022
Briefing Number:	DPMC-2021/22-1723	Security Level:	[IN-CONFIDENCE]

Purpose

1. This aide memoire is to support your meeting with the COVID-19 Independent Continuous Review, Improvement and Advice Group (the Group) on 22 March 2022.
2. The Group has expressed an interest in meeting with you to discuss the testing and surveillance regime after the Omicron wave as well as how they, as a Group, might support and assist you in your role as Associate Minister for COVID-19 Response. We (the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) Secretariat) have discussed their request to meet with you with the Minister for COVID-19 Response's Office, and there is agreement that a meeting will be useful.

The Group are delivering weekly advice notes to the Minister for COVID-19 Response

3. During the Omicron wave and since 10 February 2022, the Group has delivered weekly advice notes to the Minister for COVID-19 Response (the Minister) through which they raise areas from across the system where the Minister may wish to seek further assurance. The advice notes are accompanied by a cover page prepared by the DPMC Secretariat that sets out assurance options for the Minister's consideration for the key assurance areas highlighted by the Group. These options include (in addition to the Minister being already assured) to either direct relevant parts of the system to address the matter and provide assurance, or direct the Group to undertake further assurance work and report back on the matter.
4. The Group has provided advice relating to testing in several of the advice notes. The Minister has subsequently requested the Group follow up on a number of areas including:

- That the COVID-19 Testing Technical Advisory Group (CTTAG) will have the necessary level of authority, visibility and reporting line to Ministers to fully support the evolving testing strategies at pace.
 - That processes to procure testing capacity, rapid testing options and to implement saliva testing are proportionate in terms of assurance requirements versus the immediate risk of insufficient capacity and flow on impacts.
5. We note that the Minister has requested that the CTTAG's views are sought on the above point and we have referred this to the Ministry of Health (MoH).

The Group sees testing as a critical tool going forward

6. The Group's most recent advice note dated 11 March 2022 includes advice on the criticality of testing as a cornerstone of Aotearoa New Zealand's continued successful response post the Omicron wave. The Group are likely to pick up on the points they have raised in that advice in your conversation. This advice note and the cover page completed by Minister Hipkins are included as Attachments A and B respectively.

Testing system capacity has been viewed as a key risk by the Group

7. Testing capacity has been an issue that the Group has raised on several occasions throughout the previous year. The Group's recent advice of 11 March highlights that the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing system became overwhelmed in the early weeks of the Omicron wave, necessitating a shift to a heavy reliance on rapid antigen tests (RATs). They have urged that all available capacity is made use of and any blockages in the ability to utilise this capacity is addressed.
8. The advice note of 11 March 2022 has been shared with the COVID-19 Chief Executives' Board following which MoH has responded to the DPMC Secretariat that there is currently a lot of PCR capacity given the widespread use of RATs. MoH has also noted that saliva PCR testing remains an option as Aotearoa New Zealand moves into the post-peak phase, and that the role of PCR versus RAT (and other modalities) is under active consideration, including the social license for general public testing.
9. MoH has further advised that in Phase Three, PCR is reserved for hospitalisation, where it is required by a clinician, and for verifying positive RATs for border workers and recent returnees. As case numbers decrease there is the opportunity to look at other settings where PCR testing, including saliva PCR, would be preferred to RATs.

The Group is of the view that pre-COVID19 procurement processes have not been fit for purpose

10. While it is recognised that you are not involved in procurement decisions, the subject of Rako Science (Rako) and the length of negotiations with MoH will likely be raised. The Group has advised on a number of occasions that pre-COVID-19 government procurement processes are incongruent with the speed needed to support capacity in particular, and have used Rako as an example of where procurement could have been done differently. The Group has offered to directly support negotiations with Rako in their 11 March advice, and the Minister has agreed including that he would like the Group to look further at testing decisions.
11. In response to the 11 March advice note, MoH has informed the DPMC Secretariat in response that the relationship with Rako is going well, with Rako having been contracted to do all of the *Reconnecting New Zealanders* point of arrival testing. Rako has purchased equipment for this purpose, which MoH will reimburse them for as a result.

Testing and surveillance, including innovation, is seen as critical post-Omicron wave to ensure agility and readiness

12. The Group has raised that the testing and surveillance regime post-Omicron is necessary to ensure the system will have the necessary agility and readiness to respond to unforeseen events without causing major disruption to other services. They have highlighted that innovation will be a key factor to success in this area going forward.
13. They have, however, raised concerns that the current system does not embrace or foster innovation and that there may be blockages that are systemic in origin. As well as the example of saliva testing not yet being fully integrated, the Group has previously raised the need to adopt other rapid test technologies such as loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP) tests. They have raised most recently on 18 February that there is clear evidence LAMP tests outperform RATs and are approaching the performance of full PCR tests. Innovation is likely to be a key concern that the Group will raise in the meeting.
14. You may wish to update the Group on developments to this end. The DPMC Secretariat understands that New Zealand has approved point-of-care devices for nucleic acid amplification testing including LAMP and PCR, predominantly used in health settings; and that new innovations and/or new testing modalities such as microfluidics and breath testing are in early development, including a clear end-to-end pathway (concept to trial and implementation) which including ethics approval will be established between agencies including MoH, the Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment and agencies that fund health research on COVID-19.
15. The Group have indicated a particular interest in surveillance testing at the border, but have limited visibility of any work underway to improve surveillance testing.

The Ministry of Health have suggested the Group are invited to review the Testing Plan

16. The DPMC Secretariat has been in discussion with MoH in regard to the areas where the Minister has indicated further assurance is needed and where these touch on MoH's responsibilities.
17. MoH has suggested that the Group is invited to review the updated Testing Strategy and Testing Plan, due for report back to Cabinet in April, and we note this as an option for the Group.

The Group have expressed an interest in supporting you in your role

18. Sir Brian Roche has indicated that the Group is willing to support you in your role as Associate Minister COVID-19 Response. The Group would welcome your thoughts on whether, and in what ways they may best support you in relation to your portfolio responsibilities.

Next steps

19. Following your discussion with the Group on 22 March 2022, the DPMC Secretariat will liaise with your Office regarding any next steps as a result of the discussion.



Amber Bill
Head of System Assurance &
Continuous Improvement

21/03/2022

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall
Associate Minister for COVID-19
Response

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Attachments:	
Attachment A:	Attachment A – 2022-03-11 – CICRIAG advice note to Minister for COVID-19 Response
Attachment B:	Attachment B – 2022-03-11 – CICRIAG advice note cover page

Contact for telephone discussion

Name	Position	Telephone
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