

Te Tira Ārai Urutā – the Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19 Lessons Learned

Summaries of engagements held by the Inquiry Hamilton engagements – June 2025

These engagement summaries highlight the key points raised by a range of stakeholders to inform the Inquiry's evidence-base.

Council bodies forum

Representatives from the Councils told the Inquiry that the regional lockdown boundaries created significant difficulties, with some communities being separated from essential services and residents needing to travel long distances to access supermarkets. Communication between central and local government was initially poor, though it improved over time. However, councils said they continued to feel excluded from key decision-making processes throughout the response.

The Inquiry heard that strong partnerships with iwi and Pacific communities proved essential for reaching vulnerable populations during lockdowns. Well-established community networks and databases were used effectively for food distribution and welfare support, demonstrating the value of trusted local relationships in crisis response.

We heard that some vaccine requirements created tensions within the community. The representatives described having to balance public health obligations against individual rights concerns. The pandemic also exposed gaps in coordination between health authorities and local emergency management systems.

The Inquiry was told that community-led responses proved highly effective during the pandemic, reinforcing the case for improved central–local government coordination in future public health emergencies.

Economic development bodies forum

Representatives at this forum told the Inquiry that many small businesses struggled to survive during the lockdowns, with some business owners using personal resources to try to keep their businesses afloat. Information centres, which act as an important community hub, were not classified as an essential service during the pandemic, limiting their ability to operate and distribute important information.

Seemingly arbitrary lockdown boundaries created particular hardship, with some business owners unable to access their own premises despite living only a short distance away. While communication from central government improved over time, representatives said two-way channels for regional input remained inadequate throughout the response.

The Inquiry also heard significant concern about lasting social division resulting from vaccine mandates, with these tensions still persisting within families and communities.

For future pandemics, the representatives emphasised the importance of drawing on pre-established community networks and connections, ensuring operating guidelines for different business sectors are clear, and drawing on regional knowledge for region-specific requirements.

New Zealand National Fieldays Society

Representatives from the New Zealand National Fieldays Society told the Inquiry about the significant operational and financial pressures the organisation faced in managing its major annual agricultural event. Border restrictions also severely affected international exhibitors and attendees from contributing to the event.

We heard that maintaining connections and morale across the organisation during the lockdowns proved to be challenging, particularly for field-based staff.

Despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic and the New Zealand Government's response to it, representatives told the Inquiry that they viewed lockdowns as a necessary tool for a pandemic response. They noted that cloud-based systems had enabled successful remote operations, and emphasised the importance of maintaining adequate financial reserves to support organisational resilience in any future crisis.