

## Quarterly Report: October – December 2024

### Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Minister of Internal Affairs on the progress of Phase Two of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19 Lessons Learned (the Inquiry) towards delivery of its findings and recommendations as required under its terms of reference.
2. This is the first quarterly report for Phase Two of the Inquiry and covers the period 26 September 2024 to 31 December 2024.

### Establishing the Inquiry

3. The Inquiry was established to strengthen Aotearoa New Zealand's preparedness for, and response to, any future pandemic by identifying those lessons learned from New Zealand's response to COVID-19 that should be applied in preparation for any future pandemic.
4. The Government reviewed the scope and operation of the Inquiry and on 25 June 2024 announced there would be a second phase that would provide an opportunity to complement the work already undertaken and address some matters of public concern which were not adequately covered in the Inquiry's Phase One terms of reference.
5. The Government established Phase Two of the Inquiry by Order in Council on 26 August 2024, to provide further recommendations on actions that will strengthen New Zealand's pandemic preparedness. Phase Two will critically assess key decisions taken by the Government in response to COVID-19 during 2021 and 2022, and the associated economic responses.
6. The Order specified that Phase Two of the Inquiry was able to begin considering evidence from 29 November 2024 and must deliver its report by 26 February 2026.
7. Following the announcement of the three Commissioners for Phase Two on 27 August 2024, the Solicitor-General appointed Kristy McDonald KC as Senior Counsel Assisting the Inquiry on 15 October 2024 and Nick Whittington on 13 November 2024. The Executive Director, Helen Potiki, commenced on 29 September 2024.

### Initial activities and engagement undertaken

8. During the reporting period, Phase Two of the Inquiry focused on establishment activities such as high-level planning of what is required to deliver the report as set out in its terms of reference. This work has allowed the Inquiry to identify broad phases of work that it will undertake to deliver its report by 26 February 2026 (set out below at paragraph 26).
9. Commissioners issued the first Phase Two minute [referred to as Phase Two: Minute 1] on 18 December 2024. Phase Two: Minute 1 sets out aspects of the Inquiry's overall procedures for Phase Two. The directions in this minute reflect current circumstances and are provisional. The Inquiry may revise its directions as matters proceed, including if circumstances change.

10. In line with the procedures set out in the Phase Two terms of reference, the early focus for Phase Two of the Inquiry was to understand the scope and nature of what Phase One has covered, and in identifying the significant amount of relevant information that is already publicly available.
11. Work also began to identify the key decisions that fall within the terms of reference for Phase Two, and agencies which the Inquiry would likely issue initial section 20 orders to as part of its work to identify and gather key evidence.

### Financial Performance

12. Phase Two of the Inquiry has incurred costs to date of \$796,000, against a full-year budget of \$5.889 million as set out below:

	2024/25 Spend (YTD)	2024/25 Budget
<b>Controllable expenditure – Operations</b>	\$0.377 M	\$4.021 M
<b>Uncontrollable expenditure – Support</b>	\$0.270 M	\$1.268 M
<b>Commissioner costs</b>	\$0.149 M	\$0.600 M
<b>Total expenditure</b>	<b>\$0.796 M</b>	<b>\$5.889 M</b>

13. The total budget for Phase Two is \$14.038 million across 2024/25 and 2025/26. The Inquiry is on track to complete its Phase Two work within this budget.

### Challenges and risks

14. The success of Phase Two of the Inquiry to deliver on its Terms of Reference on time and in budget, will rely on progressing its work programme efficiently.
15. The Order in Council specifies that Phase Two of the Inquiry should make, within the scope of Phase Two:
  - findings on whether key decisions were well informed, and whether those decisions had unforeseen consequences
  - recommendations on considerations that should be taken into account in future decisions to best prepare New Zealand to respond to any future pandemics.
16. The Inquiry may need to manage expectations from some of the public (and stakeholders) that go beyond the Inquiry's Phase Two Terms of Reference.

17. It is important that stakeholders, communities of interest and the public are provided with effective ways to input to Phase Two of the Inquiry, recognising both the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on all New Zealanders, and the important role their contribution will make to the quality of the Inquiry's insights, conclusions, and final recommendations. The Inquiry is considering and planning how best to engage with the wide range of individuals, groups and the public as part of its overall communications and engagement strategy.
18. The unprecedented nature and evolution of COVID-19 has resulted in a wealth of information, briefings, reviews, and evaluations, both in the New Zealand context and internationally.
19. Given the volume of potential evidence, it will be challenging to ensure all relevant documents are considered. With this in mind, the Inquiry is developing an analytical framework to assist with the rapid assessment of documents, as well as other information management tools to support this work.

### **Expected activity next quarter**

20. Over the January to March 2025 quarter, we will start the substantive information gathering process that will allow Phase Two of the Inquiry to identify initial themes, form new lines of inquiry and generate targeted areas which require deeper exploration and evidence gathering.
21. Although the Inquiry has already been receiving submissions by email, the main process for the public to make submissions and provide evidence will run from 3 February 2025 through to 27 April 2025. The purpose of the submissions process is to:
  - Enable the wider New Zealand public to contribute their insights and experiences on specific aspects that were not looked at in Phase One such as vaccine safety and the impacts of Government's key decisions.
  - Provide an additional source of evidence to inform the Inquiry's Phase Two findings and recommendations, alongside evidence gathered from publicly available information and targeted stakeholder engagement.
  - Assist the Inquiry to validate or challenge insights found in evidence from other sources, such as publicly available information and official accounts.
  - Identify any potential gaps in terms of the Inquiry's understanding of the impacts and effects of the pandemic – and the Government's response to the pandemic – on the people of New Zealand.
22. The Inquiry will be running a limited public awareness campaign during this period to ensure the wider New Zealand public are aware of the opportunity to make a submission and/or provide evidence to Phase Two.
23. Planning will begin for additional ways to gather information for Phase Two of the Inquiry. This will include exploring options such as stakeholder engagement, commissioning research, interviews with key individuals, and holding hearings.
24. Alongside the substantive work programme, the Inquiry will also look to conclude its major establishment activities for Phase Two such as completing detailed delivery planning, developing communications channels, completing the recruitment of secretariat staff and developing the Inquiry's internal systems and processes.

### Overview of critical activities

25. Delivery planning is ongoing and evolving as the Commissioners make decisions on how the Inquiry will approach its work.
26. To deliver the Inquiry's Phase Two report by 26 February 2026, we will need to work through seven broad phases of work. Our initial view of the likely timeframes for these phases is set out below:

Key phase of work	Indicative timeframes
Establishing Phase Two	Oct 2024–Feb 2025
Gathering information and evidence	Dec 2024–July 2025
Analysing information and evidence	Aug–Sept 2025
Drafting final report content	Aug–Oct 2025
Fact checking and running a natural justice process	Nov–Dec 2025
Producing the Inquiry's final report	Jan 2026–26 Feb 2026
Decommissioning Phase Two	Post Feb 2026

27. We will continue to refine this initial view as more detailed delivery planning is completed.