



Fourth Quarterly Report: October – December 2023

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to provide a high-level summary of the activities over the period October 2023 to December 2023 of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Lessons Learned from Aotearoa New Zealand's Response to COVID-19 That Should Be Applied in Preparation for a Future Pandemic | Te Tira Ārai Urutā (the Inquiry).

Activity of the Inquiry this quarter

2. Over the October to December quarter, the Inquiry's external engagement programme reached its peak, holding a further 153 engagements with more than 650 people during this period. These engagements involved a wide range of groups and sectors from across New Zealand. As at 20 February 2024 we have met with almost 1,200 people across 285 external engagements.
3. The full list of the organisations and individuals the Inquiry has engaged with is available on the Inquiry's website and is regularly updated.
4. During this quarter the Inquiry also prepared for receiving public submissions, which were planned to open in November 2023. Work to prepare for this process, including development of a supporting public awareness campaign, was completed successfully. Commissioners chose to delay calling for public submissions until February 2024, to enable the new Government time to consider any change to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference. This delay provided time to align our call for public input with the opportunity for the public to provide their views on potential changes to the scope of the Inquiry.
5. The Inquiry's research and policy efforts reached a significant milestone this quarter, completing a first working synthesis of the evidence collected thus far. This working synthesis base will continue to evolve as the Inquiry receives new evidence from continuing direct engagements and the input from the wider public. Completing this defined initial evidence base is an important milestone as the Inquiry begins the work of identifying emerging findings, and considering what lessons and recommendations Commissioners may reach, in the following quarter.
6. On 15 November 2023 the resignation of Hon Hekia Parata as a Commissioner, tendered to the Minister in July 2023, took effect. The remaining Commissioners are continuing the Inquiry's work while awaiting the Government's decision on the appointment of an additional Commissioner.

Finance

7. Up to 31 December 2023, the Inquiry has incurred costs for the 2023/24 financial year of \$4.624 million across all expenditure, against a full-year budget of \$12.559 million.

	2023/24 Spend YTD \$Ms	2023/24 Budget \$Ms
Controllable expenditure – operations	\$3.441	\$9.585
Uncontrollable expenditure – support	\$0.781	\$1.950
Commissioner Costs	\$0.402	\$1.023
Total	\$4.624	\$12.559¹

8. The above table now reflects changes made through the October Baseline Update, including transferring underspent funding from the 2022/23 financial year into this year to cover costs that were delayed from earlier in 2023, which were not able to be reflected in our previous Quarterly Report.
9. The Inquiry is currently below our budgeted expenditure to 31 December 2023 of \$5.558 million, due to ongoing adjustments in the timing of some activity – in particular, the decision to delay the start of the public submissions process and the timing of recruitment. While much of this deferred activity is now underway, the Inquiry is anticipating a moderate underspend for the 2023/24 financial year, although much of this underspend will be required to fund activity that is now expected to occur in the 2024/25 financial year.

Challenges and risk

10. The Inquiry is committed to delivering its report on time and on budget (based on its current Terms of Reference) and remains on track to meet this commitment.
11. However, uncertainty over the Inquiry’s scope and membership at this late stage of its work presents challenges to the ongoing programme. The Government is committed to expanding the scope of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19 Lessons based on public input, by adding additional topics to the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference. Commissioners will need to work closely with the Government to understand any revised direction and impact on the current programme and budget.
12. The Inquiry is also awaiting decisions on the appointment of a new Commissioner to replace Hon Hekia Parata. As the report delivery deadline (currently set by the Terms of Reference as 30 September 2024) approaches, consideration will need to be given to where in the process of drafting and finalising its report the Inquiry will have reached when the new Commissioner would be able to join this work, to ensure that they are still able to meaningfully contribute to the Inquiry’s final report.
13. Previously flagged risks around large volumes of information to manage, and the uncertain (and potentially large) volume of input from the public submissions process, remain and continue to be managed as far as is practicable.

¹ The small discrepancy between the three component figures and the total figure given is due to rounding.

Next Quarter – expected activity

14. The first quarter of the 2024 calendar year will include a public input process (and supporting awareness campaign) that will run from early February to late-March 2024. This process will invite the public to tell their COVID-19 stories so they can inform the Inquiry's work.
15. Alongside this, the Inquiry will be facilitating the Government's public consultation on the changes it has committed to making to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference. The Inquiry will collect this information on the Government's behalf and will then provide it to the Department of Internal Affairs in April 2024.
16. The coming quarter will largely see the planned completion of the Inquiry's external engagement programme. Meetings in this period will cover groups, key individuals, and organisations that the Inquiry has yet to connect with, as well as follow-up engagements with groups or on topics where Commissioners consider that greater depth or breadth of engagement is required.
17. January to March will also include work to synthesise the published material and engagements undertaken to date. This work will include the input from the direct engagement and public submissions processes, and will continue as the Inquiry moves towards final drafting of the report in the subsequent quarter.