



# Fifth Quarterly Report: January – March 2024

## Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to provide a high-level summary of the activities over the period January 2024 to March 2024 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 January to March quarter, the Inquiry invited the wider New Zealand public to share their experiences and views of the COVID-19 response. These submissions provide an important input into the findings, lessons, and recommendations the Inquiry will reach. The public input, via an online portal, was open from 8 February 2024 until 24 March 2024 and was supported by a public information campaign across a range of traditional and social media channels, as well as direct community engagements to enable supported submissions, and in-person events. In total, almost 13,000 New Zealanders shared their stories with the Inquiry through this process.
3. Alongside the public input process, the Inquiry also undertook consultation on the Government's behalf about proposals to expand the Inquiry's terms of reference, as signalled in the Government's coalition agreements. This consultation also attracted around 13,000 responses, and the results have been passed directly onto the Department of Internal Affairs to support Ministers in any subsequent decisions they wish to make.
4. During this period, the Inquiry has also focused on largely completing its external engagement programme, holding a further 76 meetings with almost 500 individuals. This included meetings with groups across New Zealand – both online, and in person – as well as visits to Northland, Auckland, and Christchurch, facilitated sessions with target groups and communities around the country, and attendance at public events such as weekend or evening markets and A&P shows. By 31 March 2024, the Inquiry's external engagement programme included a total of 340 external meetings with almost 1,600 individuals.
5. The full list of the organisations and individuals the Inquiry has engaged with is available on the Inquiry's website and is regularly updated.
6. Throughout January to March, the Inquiry has also continued to analyse the evidence received from all sources to identify emerging findings. When combined with remaining evidence to be gathered, including from final direct engagements and the analysis of public submissions, these findings will enable the Inquiry's development of lessons and recommendations for its final report.

## Finance

7. Up to 31 March 2024, the Inquiry has incurred costs for the 2023/24 financial year of \$7.621 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	\$5.967	\$9.585
Uncontrollable expenditure – support	\$1.133	\$1.950
Commissioner Costs	\$0.521	\$1.023
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$7.621</b>	<b>\$12.559<sup>1</sup></b>

8. The Inquiry is currently below its budgeted expenditure for FY 2023/24 to 31 March 2024 of \$8.571 million, due to the ongoing impact of the 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 deferred activity is now underway, the Inquiry is anticipating a moderate underspend for the 2023/24 financial year. The Inquiry will require this underspend to fund activity during the 2024/25 financial year, particularly the requirement to retain some staff further into FY 2024/25 than originally planned to complete work required to deliver a final report.

## Challenges and risk

9. At time of writing, the Inquiry is still awaiting direction from the Government on what an expanded terms of reference might include, and an update on any additional Inquiry member(s). While the Inquiry continues to rapidly progress its work, delays in our public consultation process, including the additional work to support the consultation on the terms of reference, has placed pressure on key aspects of the Inquiry's work and overall timelines.
10. Specifically, the late and truncated timing of the public input process has impacted the Inquiry's capacity to adjust its approach to manage a higher-than-expected number of submissions, including 41% of the 13,000 submissions received in the last four days of the submission period. Supporting the parallel consultation on proposed changes to the Inquiry's terms of reference also took up time and resource. As a result, the analysis of submissions to the Inquiry will not now be completed until late May, approximately eight weeks after the expected completion, placing pressure on the Inquiry's remaining work programme and timelines.
11. The Inquiry has also continued to operate without a replacement for Hon Hekia Parata since November 2023, resulting in current Commissioners carrying out a higher engagement workload and managing the work to review and direct the secretariat's work over this period.

---

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

12. The Inquiry notes an emerging risk around the capacity of the public service and private sector agencies to respond to further information requests. This risk will be particularly acute when the Inquiry commences its fact checking and natural justice process. During this period, the Inquiry expects it will require significant volumes of material from a wide range of parties to be reviewed. It will be essential that the Inquiry receives comprehensive and timely responses from agencies to these requests, and is able to carefully consider these responses appropriately, if it is to deliver a robust and accurate report.
13. While the Inquiry continues to work towards delivering its report as quickly and efficiently as possible, Commissioners anticipate the need to discuss with Ministers the delivery timelines, and the challenges and risks these present.

#### **Next Quarter – expected activity**

14. Decisions from the Government on any expanded terms of reference will provide clarity for the Inquiry as to its final scope and enable us to plan and progress our work accordingly.
15. The Inquiry's focus in the upcoming quarter is to complete the analysis of evidence, including the analysis of public submissions (now expected late-May), and then to develop findings, lessons, and recommendations from this evidence that Commissioners wish to incorporate into the final report.
16. Pending any revised direction from the Government, the Inquiry will also begin shifting effort over this period to prepare for natural justice and fact checking processes.