

Ministry of Health response to the Office of the Auditor General's report: 'Preparations for the nationwide roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine'

18 May 2021

Introduction

The Ministry of Health has formally received a copy of the Office of the Auditor General's final report entitled: 'Preparations for the nationwide roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine.'

The Office of the Auditor General worked constructively with the Ministry on the development of the report. We appreciated the collaborative approach the Office has taken and its willingness to understand both the work the Ministry is doing to ensure we deliver a successful COVID-19 vaccination programme, and how the report's recommendations could help strengthen the overall approach to the programme.

This document sets out the Ministry's response to the report's recommendations and provides information about the actions the Ministry has taken – or is progressing – as a result of those recommendations.

Background and context

On 25 February 2021, the Office of the Auditor General ('the Office') announced its intention to carry out a review of the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 vaccination programme to coincide with the programme planning, and through the early stages of roll-out.

The Office stated at the time that an effective vaccination programme was essential to protect the safety and wellbeing of the New Zealand public, and to limit the country's economic costs of community outbreaks and border closures. The review was intended to 'provide an independent view to the public and Parliament about how the Government is planning and managing the Covid-19 vaccination programme.' This would include how the Government has gone about procuring the vaccine, establishing the vaccination programme and how it is managing the most important risks.

The purpose of the review was set out as:

- assessing how well set up the programme was
- assessing how well the associated systems and processes are working to date; and
- identifying any areas for improvement so action can be taken.

The Office said the review was the first phase of its intended work on the vaccination programme. At a later date, they intend to look at how the vaccination programme is progressing and how it is being managed, to form an overall assessment of how effectively the vaccination programme has been managed.

COVID-19 Vaccine programme snapshot as at mid-May 2021

The COVID-19 vaccine roll-out is the single biggest health programme New Zealand has ever experienced. The Ministry, in partnership with DHBs and the wider health sector, has a clear plan to ensure everyone aged 16 and over will be offered a vaccine by the end of 2021. We are progressing well against that plan which will see us steadily, then significantly, ramp up the rate of vaccination as the year goes on.

Rolling out a vaccination programme of this magnitude is an enormous undertaking, and it is complex. Like the Office in its report, the Ministry acknowledges that it will face some real challenges over the coming months. Even so, collectively, the Ministry and DHBs are on track to deliver more than 1 million doses by the end of June. This aim aligns with our overall roll-out plan, which follows a risk-based approach to providing access to the vaccine.

By June, we are confident we will have offered a vaccine to the vast majority of people in groups one and two and made real progress in vaccinating the people in group 3. This group includes people over 65; people with underlying medical conditions; and prison staff and the prison population.

From July, the remaining population aged 16 and over (group 4) will be offered a COVID-19 vaccine. This group includes around 2 million people. Vaccines will be available in a range of locations in order to make it as easy as possible for people to access COVID-19 vaccines. This is likely to include Maori and Pacific providers, doctors, pop-up centres, pharmacies, medical and hauora centres and community clinics.

Key statistics as at 12 May 2021:

- 388,877 doses of the vaccine delivered across New Zealand
- 83,000 more doses than the previous week (as at 5 May)
- 120,000 people had received their second doses
- on Tuesday, 11 May, 14,000 doses were delivered nationally
- overall, the roll-out programme is tracking ahead of plan.

A view from the Ministry

A useful and timely report

The Auditor General's report is timely and provides useful insights and observations about how the COVID-19 vaccination programme can be strengthened.

We have worked closely with the Office to ensure the report is as informed as possible and that we are well positioned to respond to the report's findings, including implementing the recommendations at pace.

The Ministry of Health accepts and acknowledges all the recommendations in the report. We have set out more detailed responses to the report's six recommendations below.

A programme moving at pace

In their report, the Office acknowledges that by undertaking this review at a comparatively early stage of the vaccination roll-out programme, some of the overall findings or conclusions will have been overtaken by work the programme has since progressed.

In all areas that the report identified as needing to be strengthened, the programme has continued to develop and has made a number of changes and improvements either during the time the report was being undertaken, or ahead of the report being finalised. Some recommendations have either been fully implemented or are largely complete.

Given the overall pace that the programme is moving at, and as areas for improvement have been identified, making those improvements has been a priority for the Ministry.

Auditor General's review recommendations – progress and response

The Office of the Auditor General's report made six specific recommendations. The Ministry's broad response to the recommendations is set out below, including key actions that the Ministry has taken since the report was begun, or as a result of the report's recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Improve transparency about the supply risks and the potential impact on the roll-out schedule in its public communications.

Response: The Ministry has begun routinely publishing key data about the roll-out, including weekly data setting out the volume of vaccine doses on hand. We have expanded the range of data we are publishing to ensure transparency of the programme, including more information about stock forecast, so that the public can better understand the risks and challenges inherent in the plan. The vulnerabilities and challenges inherent in managing the supply of vaccine has also been part of recent media briefings, comments from the COVID-19 Response Minister and the subject of public information advertising. The Ministry intends to continue to communicate vaccine supply data (within the limits of commercial confidentiality) for the duration of the programme.

Status: Complete

Recommendation 2: Develop contingency plans for major risks -- for example, that vaccine doses do not arrive at the scheduled time or in the expected quantities, or that enough workforce is not able to be secured, or that adequate workforce cannot be identified.

Response: The Ministry has undertaken a number of actions to address workforce contingency and ensure the programme can secure enough workforce as the roll-out ramps up. This includes developing a workforce planning template for DHBs to estimate and report workforce needs and the re-design of a surge database to better attract workforce interest. We also sought consideration and approval of additional health professions as approved vaccinators.

In relation to vaccine supply, we co-designed a hub-and-spoke supply model with DHBs to build local contingency supplies to mitigate acute supply issues (eg, weather events, road delay). We also encouraged vaccine facilities to hold a day's stock in advance to mitigate against acute supply issues and manage variations in demand. More broadly, contingency planning is under way for scaling up in July and plans are already in place to deal with a community outbreak.

Status: In progress

Recommendation 3: Improve guidance to district health boards about the scenarios in which it is acceptable to depart from the sequencing framework and make this transparent to the public.

Response: The Ministry has provided DHBs with additional guidance on the sequencing framework that provides for greater clarity of managing groups of people whilst rolling out the programme to their communities.

Status: Complete

Recommendation 4: Work with district health boards to make sure equity considerations are fully embedded in regional delivery plans.

Response: The Ministry's development of a Māori Tiriti and equity strategy and Pacific and disability equity strategies was comprehensive, engaged providers on the ground and positioned the programme well in terms of the support they needed. As the programme progresses, some work is required by DHBs to strengthen their equity plans and demonstrate how they will achieve equitable outcomes for Māori, Pacific and people with disabilities. The Ministry's equity team continues to work with DHBs to fully embed equity in their regional delivery plans. In addition to on-going meetings with DHBs, tailored templates for each DHB have been developed to ensure equity considerations focusing on our priority populations (Māori, Pacific and people with disabilities) are incorporated and implemented. The equity team will also monitor DHB equity performance for the vaccine roll-out.

Status: In progress

Recommendation 5: Provide more clarity to Māori and Pacific health care providers and Primary Health Organisations, including general practitioners, about the role they will need to play in the wider roll-out to ensure that those providers have adequate time to prepare.

Response: Māori and Pacific health care providers are important to the success of the roll-out of the vaccine and the Ministry is providing funding directly to Māori and Pacific health providers to support their readiness. Funding is also being provided through DHBs for vaccine support roles and service delivery.

Discussions are under way with the respective DHBs to determine how funding and people will be distributed across the regions based on the equity responses in DHB regional plans. The Ministries of Māori Development and Pacific Peoples will also be involved in those discussions. The Ministry is also preparing advice which clearly outlines the role of Māori and Pacific providers, what the Ministry is funding and our expectations to DHBs in supporting Māori and Pacific providers (such as accreditation of sites, vaccine supply and service contracts for delivering the vaccine).

The Ministry continues to increase and expand its communication with general practice and Primary Health Organisations (PHOs), specifically about their role in the wider roll-out. These communications include regular newsletters, emails, direct communication from the Director-General and media briefings with sector panellists. We also host a fortnightly webinar covering all aspects of the vaccination programme with invitations to the primary and community health care sector, attend fortnightly meetings with the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners President and Clinical Director and fortnightly attendance at the PHO Clinical Leaders' forum. In addition, a workshop was held with general practice to develop a service delivery model appropriate for general practice settings building on existing general practice vaccination processes and adapting for the COVID-19 vaccine programme. This has resulted in a draft model being developed which we continue to consult on.

Status: In progress

Recommendation 6: Improve communications planning to be clear about: key events and associated timing; what the Ministry will do to raise public awareness and encourage uptake of the vaccine; and how communications will be tailored to different audiences, in particular Māori, Pacifica, those with disabilities and other harder to reach communities.

Response: The Ministry has significantly invested in its communications capacity. It has established the position of GM, Communications and Engagement and expanded the size of the overall team. Other initiatives under way include implementing a new public information strategy and programme that provides straightforward and accessible information about the vaccine, the roll-out programme and advising groups and cohorts within those groups when and how they can be vaccinated. The campaign will also have a focus on motivating people to get vaccinated via a central proposition – ‘The Stronger our Immunity the Greater our Possibilities’.

The Ministry is also working with Te Puni Kōkiri and the Ministry for Pacific Peoples to support targeted campaigns to those communities, including through funding. The campaigns include content from ‘by Māori for Māori’ and ‘by Pacific for Pacific’ agencies, designed to resonate with these populations. The roll-out of this content is well under way and will continue throughout the vaccination programme. There are also specific Māori, Pacific and disability communications funding for organisations to develop local or regional responses on the vaccine programme to their communities. A Disability Sector Forum has recently been established to partner with the Ministry to provide timely insights and feedback on the sentiment of the sector; to provide a channel to co-design and test proposed actions, collateral and engagement; and to provide advice on how best to engage with the sector and to facilitate the dissemination of factual information on the COVID-19 vaccine to the sector. A similar Older Persons Forum has also been established.

Status: In progress