

Submission for Royal Commission of Inquiry into Covid-19 Lessons Learned

Contact details

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This submission has been prepared by Volunteering New Zealand

About Tūao Aotearoa Volunteering New Zealand

Volunteering New Zealand (VNZ) represents the 'voice of volunteering' and the 2.5 million people who volunteer within our communities across Aotearoa. VNZ is the only national organisation in New Zealand that focuses purely on volunteering. We focus on the 'big picture' as we are able to liaise, work with, and advise volunteers, our members, community and voluntary organisations, government and business sectors. This helps ensure that volunteering occurs within a positive environment where it is encouraged, fostered, and valued.

VNZ represents all volunteers who participate in volunteering activities within Aotearoa. VNZ has 100 national members, which represent 10,000 organisations. Over the past 20 years, VNZ has raised the profile of volunteering, volunteer groups, and volunteer management. We promote tools to help organisations evaluate and improve volunteer involvement and effectiveness, and have best practice guidelines and competencies for managers of volunteers.

Introduction and key thoughts

Thank you for the opportunity to input into the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Covid-19 lessons learned.

As an organisation with extensive links and responsibilities to community groups, we were deeply involved in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We also monitored and researched how the pandemic and lockdowns affected volunteer-involving organisations.

Key thoughts:

- The expertise of the Volunteer Centre network and Volunteering New Zealand should be recognised and drawn upon. The government needs to provide resourcing and connect with Volunteering New Zealand as a key stakeholder when an emergency or pandemic occurs.
- Ensure that infrastructure such as the Volunteer Centre network continues to be maintained and resourced so that it is always able to quickly scale up to support regionally and nationally in times of emergency.
- The pandemic reduced the opportunity for social contact and interactions, which had a negative impact on people's motivations to continue volunteering. Some volunteers have not have returned to volunteering post-pandemic.
- The pandemic created opportunities for different ways of working and volunteering (e.g. remotely), and organisations with an electronic system for managing volunteers were better off.
- The importance of clear guidelines and communications to volunteer-involving organisations in a pandemic situation was vital.
- Support from government and funders for community organisations is needed, including trust-based funding, resourcing for wellbeing and salaries.

Commented [V11]: Volunteer support organisations like vnz AND VOLUNTEER CENTRES NEED RESOURCING FOR THIS VITAL ROLE.

Our response to the Covid-19 pandemic

The March-April 2020 pandemic/lockdown significantly impacted the operations of many volunteer involving organisations. It disrupted their business as usual and subjected them to unprecedented circumstances, challenges, and issues. For many organisations, this required an immediate change in the way their operations were conducted.

Volunteering New Zealand worked nationally with the regional Volunteer Centres in a collaborative way to support and mobilise volunteers in support of the response to Covid-19. We organised and facilitated 22 online meetings with Volunteer Centres network on a bi-weekly basis through Alert Levels 4-2, totalling over 50 hours of supporting collaboration.

Alert level guidelines

As alert levels and advice rapidly changed, Volunteering New Zealand supported clear communications as to what these changes meant for volunteering.

We worked collaboratively from grass roots to government to ensure that clear guidelines were articulated for volunteers and volunteer organisations.

We collated stakeholder feedback and provided expert advice to the National Crisis Management Centre, inputting into a series of six guidelines issued centrally by the National Crisis Management Centre and New Zealand Government.

We disseminated these guidelines through our channels and networks, and delivered clear consistent communications through the Volunteer Centre Network, to our member organisations, their volunteers and volunteer managers. We also communicated with other stakeholders through our extensive communications channels.

We also adjusted our way of working and communicating, so that many of our seminars, and even our Annual Conference in October 2020, were held online. We cancelled our 2021 conference and didn't hold one at all in 2022. However, pivoting to online delivery/ webinars enabled us to reach more people and deliver more content.

Work to support National Crisis Management Centre in 2020

Volunteering New Zealand had a contract for services with the National Emergency Management Agency's Crisis Management Centre during 2020. The key outputs of this were to co-ordinate and provide national guidance to community organisations and the volunteer workforce in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (from 14/04/20 to 22/06/20). Our final report had these recommendations:

1. The expertise of the Volunteer Centre network and Volunteering New Zealand be recognised and drawn upon. Connecting with Volunteering New Zealand as a key stakeholder when an emergency or pandemic occurs.
2. That the regional community place-based operations of the Volunteer Centre Network be recognised as particularly important in an emergency. Volunteer Centres can play an important role in a regional or national emergency. These organisations connect communities, volunteers and organisations.
3. That the Ministry of Civil Defence maintains a working relationship with Volunteering New Zealand. This could be achieved through:

Commented [VI2]: And other stakeholders through our extensive communications channels.

- Renegotiating an MOU between VNZ and the Civil Defence NZ at a national level.
- To engage with VNZ as early as possible during a national emergency response. The sooner VNZ's engaged, the sooner it can provide support with dissemination of information and support to the wider voluntary sector.

4. To ensure that infrastructure such as the Volunteer Centre network continues to be maintained and resourced so that it is always able to quickly scale up to support regionally and nationally in times of emergency. This could include:

- Including volunteering and volunteers in crisis management pre-planning, including protocols for mobilisation.

Post-COVID-19 Status of the Community and Voluntary Sector

In May 2021 we researched the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Community and Voluntary Sector. We found the changes brought about by the pandemic created many challenges but also opportunities.

Some of our key findings included:

- Some older volunteers stopped volunteering, and some were prevented from volunteering because they have more life commitments (such as looking after grandchildren)
- A wave of new volunteers, across different age groups, began volunteering
- Funding is the biggest challenge for volunteer organisations
- Regional differences have become bolder, and the demographics of some local communities are changing
- Some community organisations have experienced an increase demand for their services, stretching staff and resources
- Many organisations and volunteers embraced new technologies and online ways of volunteering.

The report, Post-Covid-19 Status of the Community and Voluntary Sector, is [available here](#).

Ongoing support for sector COVID response

In the 2021-22 year, Volunteering New Zealand continued to support the sector with ongoing Covid response work, particularly around vaccine mandates. Our resource pages, requiring weekly updating for a sustained period, were a trusted source for the wider sector. We saw:

- 3150 visits to our Vaccines and volunteers page and
- 4141 visits to our Responding to COVID-19 page.

Research with the Community Sector

Hauora Wellbeing Survey

Just before Aotearoa went into its second nationwide lockdown in August 2021, we checked in with more than 600 tangata whenua, community and voluntary organisations to see how they were coping. It was a follow-up of a 2020 survey which showed similar trends, and included focus groups with organisations caring for Māori, Pasifika, migrant and refugee-background, and disabled communities. The resulting report is the [Covid-19 Hauora Wellbeing survey](#).

Some key findings included:

- More than two-thirds (68%) of respondents expressed some level of concern for increased workloads of paid staff and/or volunteers since the Covid-19 restrictions began.
- People in the sector have shown tenacity and flexibility in response to the challenges COVID-19 has presented. They have collaborated with others and extended networks and relationships more widely.
- The research highlighted the support needed from the government and funders, including: Incentives for collaboration, within and between community organisations, government and funders; Competitive funding models must be replaced with trust-based models that respond to local need; Resourcing for wellbeing and salaries is needed to support paid staff and volunteers, not only projects.

Smaller scale organisations were more impacted by funding challenges and more likely to cut their service delivery levels. A need for more volunteers was the top non-financial need for these organisations.

This report has informed the work of both Volunteering New Zealand and Hui-E Community Aotearoa, and has guided the Minister for the Community and Voluntary Sector and the Department of Internal Affairs.

State of Volunteering in Aotearoa New Zealand 2022

The *State of Volunteering* is Volunteering New Zealand's flagship report on the state of the community and voluntary sector. The 2022 iteration surveyed volunteers, and leaders of organisations, as well as focus groups and semi-structured interviews. One of the themes was the impact of Covid-19 and lessons learnt.

Covid-19 negatively impacted volunteering organisations and their ability to deliver services. This resulted in having to suspend volunteering programmes and loss of volunteers due to the vaccine mandates. Despite most respondents supporting Covid-19 regulations, they added additional burdens and barriers to delivering their services. In addition, Covid-19 reduced many organisations' funding streams e.g. Op shops. On the positive side, organisations with an electronic system for managing volunteers were better off than those without.

Covid-19 also adversely affected volunteers' experience and even ability to volunteer. Volunteers over 65 years of age were twice as likely to report that concerns about Covid-19 had prevented them volunteering.

One of the main reasons people volunteer is the way it enables them to connect with others and form friendships. Covid-19-related restrictions, such as lockdown and social distancing guidelines, affected the way volunteers were able to interact with each other, which had downstream negative effects on their motivation to continue volunteering. This effect was especially prominent in focus groups held with Māori volunteers who noted a significant cultural challenge in not being able to hug and touch freely.

The report, State of Volunteering in Aotearoa New Zealand 2022, is [available here](#).

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic and government response, including lockdowns, alert levels and vaccine mandates, while beneficial for saving lives and keeping people healthy, had a significant impact on the community and voluntary sector.

Volunteering New Zealand had to respond and provide advice to our members and the wider community. It required a time-consuming and continuous response over two years. We were a vital, linking organisation and our response was not covered by business-as-usual funding.

Our research showed the pandemic had a major effect on community organisations and volunteering. Smaller organisations especially struggled with increased demand for services, unmatched by funding. It also led to increased collaboration and informal connections between community groups.

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