



Feedback to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet for upcoming Cabinet paper

Preparing for new COVID-19 variants

At the New Zealand Disability Support Network (NZDSN), we would like to thank you for the opportunity to provide written feedback for upcoming Cabinet paper on “Preparing for new COVID-19 variants”. NZDSN acknowledges the importance of preparation for future possible variants of COVID-19, and we appreciate your work and engagement with communities.

We agree that the possible scenarios provide a framework for developing and implementing appropriate measures. However, we believe the initial thinking is very health-focussed. For disability service providers, preparation for new COVID-19 variants is a matter of protecting their clients and their staff and having resources and options to ensure continuity of support if/when staff shortages occur due to COVID-19. Therefore, while the scenarios may be reasonable, the options to address that are offered may be unsuitable/too limited for our sector.

Before moving on to answer some of the specific questions from the PowerPoint pack, I would like to note that the New Zealand Disability Support Network (NZDSN) is the national peak body representing over 160 disability support organisations and providers that provide support services to disabled people, mainly through contracts with government. As a membership-based organisation, we lead and influence changes required to support an inclusive life for disabled people in Aotearoa New Zealand. We represent Disability Support providers in discussions with various government Ministries and Agencies.

NZDSN’s feedback - general

It is signalled in the PowerPoint pack that in preparation for new COVID-19 variants, the Government needs to ensure that disabled people and their whānau have access to support, as well as accurate, up to date and accessible information; that health care and disability support services are continued; and that the implications of any future measures for the disability community are thoroughly considered. While we are pleased to see these issues have been identified, we are concerned that some baseline and response measures would significantly affect the ability of providers to serve the disability community. Hence, service continuity and satisfactory access to information and support are easier said than done; and we have witnessed issues with this during the pandemic especially at earlier stages and then during the Omicron outbreak. NZDSN would like to emphasise the need for a comprehensive plan for

health care and disability service continuity in the face of future possible variants of COVID-19 or indeed other pandemics that impact the disabled community. This plan should factor in specific characteristics of the disability support sector, such as significant variation in the sector's demographic makeup (a handful of large providers employing two thirds of the workforce, and a significant number of smaller providers employing around 8% of the workforce) and the current challenges faced by the sector as a result of a severe support staff shortage. Any preparation without such a plan would result in unsatisfactory outcomes for the disability community and disability support providers.

It is an additional limiting factor that this activity fails to recognise the need for the same planning to respond to any pandemic or viral outbreak that may impact (disability) communities. We should not just be limited to COVID-19.

NZDSN's feedback - specific questions

Please see below NZDSN's response to specific questions from the PowerPoint pack:

- **Are we considering the right baseline measures?**

The baseline measures are the right ones for the general public and the disability community. However, disability support providers should be offered more support and better access to some of these baseline measures supports so they can continue providing disability support services. For instance, better access to "surveillance and testing". This has been a persistent issue especially during the Omicron outbreak.

- **Are there any measures missing?**

Considering the critical importance of service continuity for disabled people, NZDSN would like to see additional measures (these can be in various shapes or forms) aiming at supporting disability support providers. The COVID-19 pandemic has had varied and significant impacts on disability support providers. As a result, service provision has been disrupted or suspended. Some of the response measures have too contributed to service disruption. Hence, additional measures are required to enable support providers to continue their services should new COVID-19 variants hit New Zealand and a public health response is required.

- **Do you have any views on targeted protection as part of those baseline measures?**

Due to compounding vulnerabilities, we believe the disability community requires targeted protection against new COVID-19 variants. Some of this protection should be targeted at disabled people to strengthen prevention, and some of it should focus on the delivery of disability support services. Disability support providers should be consulted during the preparation process, so they can contribute to creating an appropriate service delivery/continuity plan.

- **Which measures do you consider rights limiting?**

Population level restrictions, isolation and quarantine, and border restrictions can all potentially be rights limiting. However, our main concerns are those restrictions that disrupt support services, prevent service providers from delivering their support services, or prevent disabled people from receiving their support services.

- **Given measures previously used – how could disruption to normal life be minimised for everyone, including those susceptible to COVID-19?**

To minimise disruption to normal life, various communities need to be consulted. We need to learn from the impacts of the pandemic so far, hear people's and organisations' concerns, and create preparation plans and potential solutions that account for everyone including those who are more vulnerable to COVID-19. Further, communities need to see that government officials are willing and able to introduce greater flexibilities in such times of stress, in order to ensure support service continuity.

- **How would responses to new variants affect your communities?**

If new variants result in widespread outbreaks, gathering restrictions, isolation or quarantine, disability service providers will struggle to continue their usual services. Considering that many disabled people are dependent on these services, the impacts would be very significant for the disability community. This is on top of the impact that disability community shares with the general public (for instance, financial pressure, deteriorated mental health, and so forth).

- **How can we effectively support whānau and community preparedness for new variants?**

Whānau, community and support service providers need to be consulted with in preparation for new variants. In addition, they must be provided with relevant information and resources. Clear, widespread, and targeted communication will be a key to empowerment of whānau and community. Community building initiatives can be used to increase the resilience of communities in the face of new variants. For the disability community, a specific plan is needed that covers various social, financial, communication, and support elements, especially how disability support services can be sustained in different scenarios.

For further comment

Please contact Dr Solmaz Nazari on 027 293 1900 to discuss any of the opinions raised.