



Submission to the Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

Overview

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) served two Prime Ministers, supported their Cabinets, supported National Cabinet, and worked across the Australian Public Service (APS) to ensure that the Commonwealth Government's (Government) response to COVID-19 was delivered to the highest possible standard.

As global concern about a potential pandemic emerged, PM&C applied its whole-of-government and whole-of-nation approach to working with stakeholders across the APS, state and territory governments and international partners to enable the Commonwealth Government to respond quickly to the emerging health and economic crisis and protect Australians' wellbeing and advance their interests.

Performing this work required a combination of maintaining and scaling up existing functions, activating existing plans, including those that sit under the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework, and, where necessary, creating and contributing to new initiatives in response to the pandemic. Key areas of focus for PM&C included:

- Providing whole of government coordination and advice,
- Supporting national governance arrangements, and
- Ensuring business continuity.

This submission discusses how PM&C carried out these functions and how they might be refined to better support future Commonwealth pandemic responses.

Providing Whole of Government Coordination and Advice

Throughout the pandemic, PM&C worked to provide advice to the Government and other stakeholders on the unfolding crisis and associated response.

In the early phase of the response, PM&C reviewed critical functions within the department to realign priorities and allocations of staff to COVID-19 related activities, while ensuring critical business as usual functions could continue.

For many existing teams within PM&C this meant incorporating advice on the effects of and responses to COVID-19 in relation to the policy areas they usually worked on, from welfare payments to energy security and international agreements. PM&C's longstanding approach of being agile and responsive to unexpected or urgent tasks meant teams were generally able to adapt well to the increased volumes of work and utilised their existing skills and relationships to gather and analyse information and provide a whole-of-government perspective on the pandemic.

PM&C also worked to ensure advice provided to government considered the varied impacts of the pandemic and responses to it on different community groups and populations. The Office for Women, for example, provided advice on the gendered impacts of the pandemic and advocated to improve practical outcomes for women. PM&C also played an important role in bringing together departments, states and territories and key First Nations leaders to respond quickly to protect the health of First Nations Australians (for example, by restricting travel to remote communities), and ensuring their interests were considered in the development of the Government's response.

PM&C also used existing and new interdepartmental structures to enable decision making, as well as coordinating and implementing the APS' response to the crisis. Bodies such as the Secretaries Board and the newly established COVID Deputies and Chief Operating Officers Committee held frequent meetings during the pandemic (often more than twice weekly and at times daily), allowing a range of policy, governance and coordination issues to be addressed and helping to provide common messaging, and reinforcing a sense of shared purpose and "one APS".

In addition to maintaining its business-as-usual functions, staff and resources within PM&C were also urgently redeployed externally to other departments including Services Australia, and within PM&C to establish COVID-19 specific policy, data, briefing, leadership and crisis management functions. These functions were stood-up, adapted and refined over the course of the pandemic in order to fill identified gaps and meet the government's changing needs.

Examples of Specific Functions and New Initiatives

COVID-19 Taskforces

PM&C established the Disaster Preparedness and Response Branch (DPRB) on 3 March 2020 to support PM&C's early COVID-19 policy coordination and response requirements, restructuring the workforce to support the Prime Minister's needs and coordinate policy responses across the APS. As these requirements evolved, the response expanded to become the COVID-19 Taskforce, coordinating whole-of-PM&C and interagency responses across the APS, providing up to date information to agencies implementing the Government's response, and ensuring operational responses were coordinated across the APS.

The COVID Taskforce was wound down in June 2020 but was later re-established as the COVID Response Taskforce in response to the Melbourne 2021 winter wave of cases. Continuing its work into 2022, the COVID Response Taskforce supported COVID Deputies meetings and drove coherence across agencies' day-to-day responses to the evolving challenges of the pandemic, including implementation of the transition plans described below.

A new branch focusing on COVID-19 health related matters was also established in May 2020, allowing for more direct collaboration and oversight on COVID-19 related issues with the Department of Health and Aged Care, and for the existing PM&C Health Branch to continue its 'business as usual' work. Prior to the establishment of the dedicated COVID-19 Health Priorities Branch, COVID-related health advice was provided through the PMC Health Branch, with supplemented resources including several additional SES. The branch led the work of briefing the Prime Minister on the health impacts of the pandemic, along with providing advice on vaccine strategy (including purchasing and delivery), quarantine arrangements and daily information on health information and data. The branch also led the coordination of advice within PM&C on all health aspects of the pandemic.

On 5 February 2021, responding to a direction from National Cabinet, PM&C established the COVID-19 Risk Analysis and Response Taskforce (also called the COVID-19 Response Taskforce or the First Secretaries Group Taskforce) to bring together analysis of economic and health considerations across the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments and work together to provide recommendations to the National Cabinet about consistent and coordinated COVID-19 responses. The COVID-19 Response Taskforce led the development of the National Plan to Transition Australia's National COVID-19 Response, agreed by National Cabinet in July 2021. The COVID-19 Response Taskforce completed its work in December 2021.

In late August 2022, a cross-agency COVID-19 Transition Taskforce was established and hosted by PM&C, and co-led by PM&C and the Department of Health and Aged Care. The Transition Taskforce comprised representatives from all three central agencies (PM&C, Department of the Treasury and Department of Finance), as well as representatives from the Department of Health and Aged Care and from Home Affairs. It was supported by a Band 3 Inter-Departmental Committee, co-chaired by PM&C and Department of Health and Aged Care which comprised representatives from all APS organisations.

Its purpose was to develop a framework to transition COVID-19 response measures to post-pandemic business as usual arrangements. The Strategic Framework was endorsed by the Commonwealth Government and noted by National Cabinet as the framework through which the Commonwealth would transition all COVID-19 arrangements. It is available [online](#). The COVID-19 Transition Taskforce concluded in December 2022.

Throughout the pandemic a number of other subsidiary taskforces were also established to address specific issues such as international student arrivals and international reopening.

While all these taskforces enabled the timely provision of whole of government advice and coordination, the overlap between them and their spread across PM&C (and thus different reporting lines) did at times create duplication and cause coordination issues. Future departmental pandemic responses may benefit from the creation of a central, well-staffed team with responsibility for PM&C's coordination and strategy.

Priorities and Delivery Unit

The Priorities and Delivery Unit (PDU) played a pivotal role presenting daily data and providing advice to Government, as well as National Cabinet. The PDU supported the Department of Health and Aged Care to set up processes to store, process and analyse vaccine and epidemiology information, including support for the production of daily vaccine updates¹. Real time data on the vaccination roll out informed decision making pertaining to the implementation of the rollout, and informed decisions on the speed of re-opening.

The PDU drew on multiple data sources from Commonwealth, state and territory sources as well as private sector and international sources on COVID-19. Data on health measures was combined with a range of real-time economic and mobility data to brief the Prime Minister daily on the status of health and economic aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This included at the peak over 10 daily briefing products to the Prime Minister's Office, including a roughly 40 page Prime Minister's Brief that was updated twice a day.

This information was disseminated across Government to provide a common understanding of risks and improvements. PDU partnered with the Department of Health and Aged Care and state and territory governments to enable the flow of data to National Cabinet, enabling robust and evidence based decision making. The Common Operating Picture (COP)² presented fused critical health metrics including rate of cases, outbreaks, hospital capacity and vaccination to National Cabinet, to inform decisions regarding Australia's response to COVID-19 and speed of reopening and relaxing of restrictions. The traffic light presentation of the COP denoted a specific level of concern or action, meaning that metrics coded red warranted close scrutiny by Ministers, while metrics coded amber could be de-escalated to monitoring by officials.

¹ [COVID-19 vaccination rollout update | Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care](#)

² [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) common operating picture | Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care](#)

The need to provide accurate and up-to-date information on COVID-19 helped break down silos relating to data and information. However, in the future, clear and robust data sharing arrangements with the states (such as under Federation Funding Agreements) would save time and ensure comprehensive data is available early.

Behavioural Science

PM&C's Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government (BETA) produced and synthesised behavioural science evidence to inform various policy decisions made by Cabinet committees, National Cabinet, First Secretaries Group, the Chief Operating Officers Committee and others. BETA provided advice based on its own survey research into Australians' behaviours, as well as existing and emerging behavioural science literature. Topics BETA advised on included protective health behaviours, vaccination, and workplace issues. BETA worked directly with other parts of PM&C (such as the COVID-19 Response Taskforce) as well as partnering on specific issues with other departments, including the Department of Health and Aged Care on two guides to support people's psychological preparedness for hotel quarantine. BETA also engaged informally with behavioural science experts in academia and in the NSW and Victorian governments.

Vaccine Strategy Integration Group

The Vaccine Strategy Integration Group was established in January 2021 to ensure a cohesive and collaborative approach to the vaccine rollout, ensuring all aspects are aligned between the Commonwealth and states and territories, including integration of non-health components. The group was led by the Deputy Secretary Social Policy Group and was supported in PM&C by the COVID-19 Health Branch and Commonwealth-State Relations Branch. Membership included the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care and all states and territories First Ministers Department at the Deputy Secretary level. The group was designed to share information and work through issues quickly in the first few months of the vaccine rollout. The group also worked closely with partner agencies that lead different aspects of the rollout, providing a central and coordinated approach. For the first several months it met daily and then less frequently as the rollout matured.

Communications

The established PM&C communications team contributed to providing whole of government messaging around the pandemic and government response.

The team worked with the Digital Transformation Agency (DTA) to rebuild the Australia.gov.au website to make it fit for purpose as a COVID-19 portal, bringing together information from all Commonwealth agencies (including Department of Health and Aged Care, Department of the Treasury, Services Australia, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Home Affairs) as well as clear links to State and Territory Government COVID-19 information. In 2020, the website was visited by more than 18 million unique users. High traffic continued throughout 2021.

The team also established 'Australian Government' social media accounts across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Linked In where information was posted, and questions answered. This content covered all Commonwealth agencies and state and territory government information was re-posted where appropriate (e.g. the announcement of new stay at home measures or border closures). These accounts quickly built strong followings from people who would not normally follow departmental accounts. 2,440 original social media posts were published between March 2020 and December 2021, generating 205 million impressions.

The website and social media channels were managed 24/7 and updates from National Cabinet, Prime Minister press conferences and other public announcements were quickly available on the site, including after hours and on weekends.

Questions from the public were generally responded to within 24 hours using language cleared by departments with responsibility for a particular issue.

Future government pandemic responses would likely benefit from the rapid establishment of a central communications hub, or a whole-of-government communications taskforce to manage Commonwealth messaging and to coordinate public communication messages with states and territories. This would be best led by PM&C, but have representation from key agencies involved in the response. Such a team or taskforce would have ownership of and be responsible for maintaining digital communication channels and any branding and downloadable collateral.

A central whole of government communications taskforce would also have a role to play translating health advice and advising on how to best present it, noting that during the pandemic health advice (including technical vaccine advice from ATAGI) was often written in technical and opaque language. Such a taskforce could also advise on when to present information, as the timing of press conferences and publication of advice, may have at times contributed to a sense of crisis that was not warranted.

National COVID-19 Commission Advisory Board.

On 25 March 2020, the then Prime Minister (the Hon Scott Morrison MP) established the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission (NCCC) (which became the National COVID-19 Commission Advisory Board) to assist in minimising the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and bring a business perspective to the longer term economic recovery.

Based within PM&C, the NCCC was charged with helping Government address a range of problems, such as supply and employment issues, helping industry and businesses to develop COVIDSafe plans and providing a strategic advisory role to Government on longer term economic recovery.

The NCCC was led by Mr Neville Power and supported by the Deputy Chair, Mr David Thodey AO, and a board of commissioners. On its establishment, the commissioners were Mr Greg Combet AM, Ms Jane Halton AO PSM FAICD FIPPA, Mr Paul Little AO, and Ms Catherine Tanna. Each of the commissioners led the development of strategies and engagement within a specific stream or sector relevant to their expertise, across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. The commissioners were joined on the

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NCCC executive board by the then PM&C Secretary, Mr Philip Gaetjens, and the then Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs, Mr Mike Pezzullo AO.

As the pandemic and the Government's response to it evolved, NCCC members drew on their business networks and experience in giving practical and strategic advice to Government. In the initial stages of the crisis, it focused on assisting in the resolution of immediate issues, such as shortages in personal protective equipment and unblocking supply chains. It then worked with industry and businesses to develop COVIDSafe plans so they could reopen safely as restrictions were lifted. The NCCC then transitioned to focus on longer term economic recovery issues, playing a strategic advisory role to Government. The NCCC Advisory Board was disbanded on 3 May 2021.

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Supporting National Governance Arrangements

The Australian response to COVID-19 was a national endeavour, with state and territory governments responsible for a wide range of actions that gave effect to national decisions and augmented the Commonwealth response.

Ensuring that the right people were in the room with the right information was key to supporting a coordinated national response. To do this, PM&C supported a variety of decision making forums, establishing strong working relationships with state and territory counterparts that enabled the Commonwealth and the states and territories to receive expert advice in order to form a common picture, and in turn build consensus and shared direction.

Council of Australian Government (COAG) and National Cabinet

Ahead of the pre-scheduled 13 March 2020 COAG meeting, PM&C worked quickly with the states and territories to revise the agenda to focus on the pandemic, including consideration of revised national governance arrangements.

Following the 13 March 2020 meeting, the then Prime Minister announced the establishment of National Cabinet. This became the key national decision-making body to manage the COVID-19 pandemic response. In a further development, on 29 May 2020, the then Prime Minister announced that COAG would cease and be replaced by the National Cabinet. These initiatives, the establishment of which was supported by PM&C, provided a new architecture for the governance of the Australian federation.

Since 13 March 2020, National Cabinet has met on 74 occasions, where COVID related matters were discussed, including:

- international and domestic border arrangements for passengers and freight
- COVID-19 testing and tracing
- quarantine arrangements
- the National Partnership on the COVID-19 Response
- the Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment
- isolation periods
- wearing of masks
- the framework for a nationally consistent approach to transition Australia's COVID-19 response.

Other Ministerial Councils (e.g. Treasurers, Health Ministers, and Infrastructure Ministers) also met regularly to support a national response to the challenges of the pandemic.

PM&C provides secretariat support to National Cabinet, including coordinating government advice and key documents to the National Cabinet, as well as working with state and territory counterparts to aid preparation for the meetings.

National Cabinet was initially established as a committee of Cabinet, and this provided some challenges with the dissemination of materials classified Protected and above under cabinet confidentiality

provisions. Officials in jurisdictions were required to obtain a security clearance to enable access to classified material. Workarounds were established to disseminate National Cabinet classified material as documents could not be sent via the usual channels used by the Commonwealth (i.e. protected email or CabNet+). Processes improved over time, including the provision of Citrix accounts, to account for the Commonwealth and the states and territories having incompatible systems.

The first meeting of National Cabinet under the Albanese Government was on 17 June 2022 and this and all subsequent meetings were no longer held as a committee of Federal Cabinet. Whilst most documents are transmitted via email at Official level, the capability for delivering PROTECTED documents has been maintained.

Meetings were held virtually, via the Ministerial Communication Network (MCN). These are fixed systems located in a secure office, usually at the First Ministers' departments in each jurisdiction, allowing discussions up to Secret, with some First Ministers able to obtain a deployable device which enabled them to dial in to meetings outside of the traditional access controlled areas. This was a feature of the National Cabinet meetings under Cabinet requirements.

Senior Officials Meetings

COAG Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) and Deputy Senior Officials Meeting (DSOM) were senior officials' forums, chaired respectively by the Secretary of PM&C and relevant PM&C Deputy Secretary, where matters requiring intergovernmental coordination with First Ministers' departments were discussed. Following the establishment of National Cabinet these forums were replaced in June 2020 by the First Secretaries Group (FSG) and First Deputies Group (FDG).

PM&C senior officials were also responsible for chairing FSG and FDG, which met on a more frequent basis than COAG SOM and DSOM. These senior officials' forums supported National Cabinet and also discussed other matters requiring intergovernmental coordination with First Ministers' departments. During the pandemic these forums brokered solutions to policy and operational issues, freeing up National Cabinet to focus on strategic issues. Since they were established in July 2020, FSG and FDG have met on 53 occasions and 72 occasions respectively where COVID-19 matters were discussed.

Meetings were generally held virtually, using Microsoft Teams, enabling officials to meet as often as required, and with shorter notice for the scheduling of meetings. By ensuring regular contact at senior levels across jurisdictions, information was shared quickly and efficiently in both directions.

Between March 2020 and June 2022, the National Cabinet function and the Senior Officials secretariat were located in different divisions of PM&C. National Cabinet, as a committee of Cabinet, was located in Cabinet Division, whereas the operation of FDG and FSG was operated out of the Commonwealth-State Relations Branch (CSRB). Since the transition of the National Cabinet secretariat into CSRB, improved communication and collaboration at all levels have been realised, with consistent points of contact and a single information flow between the Commonwealth and jurisdictions.

Ensuring Business Continuity

Like all Australian workplaces, the pandemic required a number of changes to PM&C's operations to ensure that departmental staff and other stakeholders' wellbeing was supported and that they could continue to perform critical business functions in a changing operating environment.

To do this PM&C established an internal COVID-19 response working group led by the Chief Operating Officer, with representation across corporate enabling areas, which enacted the internal PM&C Pandemic Plan. The PM&C Pandemic Plan was updated in March 2020 and again in March 2022.

PM&C also established an online staff resource, the COVID-19 portal, hosting information including leave advice in line with whole of government positions, wellbeing supports and incident management protocols. The PM&C Business Continuity Plan was not formally enacted as staffing did not reach critical levels and there were no major incidents.

PM&C's existing digital systems and Flexible Working Policy meant it was well-placed to transition to remote working arrangements at the start of the pandemic, reducing business disruption.

At PM&C, most staff already worked on laptops, using an online document sharing system, and large numbers of staff are able to work remotely on PM&C's private network at the same time. In recognition of the change in risk from having large numbers of people working remotely, PM&C provided advice to staff about appropriate handling of information and assets to meet the requirements of the Protective Security Policy Framework. In addition, PM&C increased its focus on cyber threats related to COVID-19, such as an increased threat of email phishing attacks containing topics related to COVID-19.

Due to security and operational requirements some PM&C staff were required to continue to come into the office throughout the pandemic. This risk was managed by maintaining social distancing and splitting teams into two (A and B sub-teams) where practical, with alternating office days to minimise the risk of an entire team being exposed.

PM&C teams also implemented agile solutions to support the Prime Minister and other key stakeholders to hold and attend key meetings and multilateral fora held during the pandemic. These ranged from supporting the Prime Minister to attend virtual meetings including the 2020 and 2021 Annual Leaders' Dialogues for PNG and the 2020 G20 Riyadh Summit to the distribution of 'fly-away-kits' for attendees unable to travel and use appropriate facilities for remote National Cabinet meetings.

Practices to enable ongoing operation of the Federal Executive Council (ExCo) were implemented in consultation with His Excellency the Governor-General. This ensured continued consideration of items requiring decision at ExCo (such as legislative changes, significant appointments and trade agreements), throughout the pandemic.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The unprecedented scope and scale of the COVID-19 crisis and the government's response to it made PM&C's convening and coordinating role more essential than ever. While PM&C performed its role supporting the Commonwealth Government responsively, there were still areas for improvement that should be considered to improve future pandemic responses.

As a central agency PM&C leaned into its ability to leverage relationships and bring together relevant expertise and diverse points of view to ensure that governments were equipped to make the best possible decisions and that their decisions could be disseminated and implemented quickly and effectively.

PM&C's staff stepped up to the challenges presented by COVID and many worked long and hard hours, taking on new responsibilities and adapting rapidly as needed, whether it be within PM&C or supporting other departments.

In retrospect, PM&C could have set up a structure early in the pandemic that better brought together the various COVID-19 functions. Much of the coordination inside the department relied on individuals and informal networks keeping each other informed, which worked reasonably well but could have been supported by more formal structures. Future pandemic responses would benefit from ensuring that there are pre-existing mechanisms for setting up central response coordination teams and governance structures to quickly respond to crises. The recently established Resilience and Crisis Management Division provides a strong platform for this. Staff with relevant skills from across the APS should also be identified in advance so that they can be asked to step up when needed.

The length of the pandemic also highlighted the need to allocate resources and conduct planning in such a way that ensures the APS can support a sustained response lasting well beyond the initial surge. Planning needs to consider the staffing rotation after next to provide continuity of response and allow staff to be rested. This approach would also ensure the retention of corporate knowledge within response teams. Resourcing should recognise that necessary skill sets are likely to change over time as policy responses adjust. This includes the importance of allocating resources early to emerging and future risks (for example vaccine distribution and new variants).

Future pandemic responses will benefit from structures established during COVID-19, including National Cabinet, that enable whole-of-government and cross jurisdictional decisions to be made from the get go. As time passes it will also be important to ensure that the strong relationships and structures built during the pandemic are maintained through regular engagements and planning exercises. It would be worth however reviewing Commonwealth-state mechanisms and powers to ensure they are appropriate and fit for purpose. The overlap, and at times lack of clarity, about the various Commonwealth pandemic powers created uncertainty and delayed some aspects of the response.