

## Covid-19 Wellbeing Insights Paper for publication: *The wellbeing of rural communities*

<b>Date due to MO:</b>	01/02/2023	<b>Action required by:</b>	14/02/2023
<b>Security level:</b>	UNCLASSIFIED	<b>Briefing number:</b>	BN2023-001
<b>To:</b>	Hon Dr Ayesha Verall, Minister of Health		
<b>Copy to:</b>	Hon Peeni Henare, Associate Minister of Health (Māori Health) Hon Barbara Edmonds, Associate Minister of Health (Pacific Peoples)		

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### Contact for Telephone Discussion

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
Karen Orsborn	Chief Executive
Dr. Filipo Katavake-McGrath	Director Wellbeing System Leadership

### Minister's Office to Complete

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|--|------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Approved            | <input type="checkbox"/> Decline   | <input type="checkbox"/> Noted              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Needs change        | <input type="checkbox"/> Seen      | <input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by event |
| <input type="checkbox"/> See Minister's note | <input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn |   |

Comment:

# Covid-19 Wellbeing Insights Paper for publication: *The wellbeing of rural communities*

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**Security level:** UNCLASSIFIED **Date:** 1/02/2023

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**To:** Hon Andrew Little, Minister of Health

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## Purpose

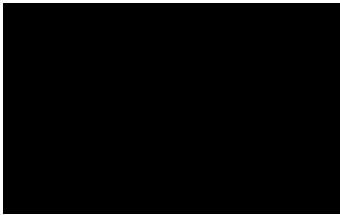
1. On 14 February, Te Hiringa Mahara intends to publish the attached papers on effect of the pandemic on the wellbeing of rural communities in Aotearoa.
2. This is the first piece of advice that you, and Hon Barbara Edmonds, will receive from Te Hiringa Mahara in your new Ministerial portfolios. We will provide an introductory briefing on our role and the mental health and wellbeing systems in the coming weeks, and look forward to meeting with you to discuss our work.

## Executive Summary

3. On 14 February, we will publish a summary and full version of *The wellbeing of rural communities*, the third of eight COVID-19 insights reports to be produced.
4. This report looks at the impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of people in rural communities, as framed by the He Ara Oranga wellbeing outcomes framework. In short, it shows that rural communities face different wellbeing challenges to urban Aotearoa, and the pandemic has presented a range of additional stresses:
  - Rural communities are not one monolithic group, and the pandemic has affected different parts of rural communities differently. Farmers face particular challenges that other part of rural community do not; and with a higher rural population, rural issues disproportionately affect Māori.
  - Geographies, economies and cultures of rural communities present challenges to mental health and wellbeing outcomes – particularly related to isolation and connectivity, workforce challenges in the economy and health services, and uncertainty in rural economies.
  - Many rural communities, through iwi, marae, community hubs, or informal arrangements banded together to support one another and reduce some of the worst impacts of the pandemic. This includes sharing information, kai, and resources.
5. We call for greater understanding of and research into the diverse needs and experiences of rural communities, and greater involvement of rural communities in planning and decision-making, particularly with rural Māori.
6. A media release and a LinkedIn post will be made alongside publication. Te Hiringa Mahara will respond to any media interest, but no specific media appearances are planned. Both the summary and technical papers, and a high-level communications plan are attached, for your information. The media release, key messages, and a Q&A will be shared with your office before the publication date.

## Recommendations

7. We recommend you:
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|---|-----------------|
| a) <b>note</b> that, on 14 February, and subject to minor editing changes, Te Hiringa Mahara will publish the attached reports on <i>The wellbeing of rural communities</i> | <b>Yes / No</b> |
| b) <b>note</b> we intend to release this briefing under our proactive release policy  | <b>Yes / No</b> |
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Karen Orsborn  
**Chief Executive**  
Date: 1/02/2022

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall  
**Minister of Health**  
Date:

## Background

8. As outlined in previous briefings to the Minister of Health [BN2022-010, BN2022-016, and BN2022-019 refer], we have so far published the first two of eight insights reports to be produced as part of the Covid-19 Impacts Insights Programme.
9. The programme provides short, accessible, focused reports in an agile way. It cannot provide a comprehensive view of the impacts of Covid-19; it provides key insights on wellbeing areas or populations of focus.
10. This third report in the series provides a description of the wellbeing impacts of pandemic for people in rural communities in Aotearoa. It brings together published literature, data from social surveys, and the views of representatives from a range of rural communities, analysed using our *He Ara Oranga Wellbeing Outcomes Framework*.

## Summary of findings

11. 'Rural' means different things to different people. At times, in Aotearoa, rural is conflated with farming or agriculture, however rural means different things in different contexts. In this report we do not seek to define 'rural', or rural-urban boundaries, but in general focus on those communities and groups who consider themselves rural, and who face common challenges related to geographical isolation.
12. Despite the importance of rural communities in Aotearoa, and the recognised challenges they face, there is a lack of published research on the impact of COVID-19 on their wellbeing. Much of the published information that exists is focused on farmers and farming communities, with less focused on other parts of the rural community.
13. The isolation or distribution of people and resources in rural Aotearoa is its defining feature and presented challenges in the pandemic context.
  - In Aotearoa around 16% of the population live in rural areas, and around 35% in total live outside of large urban areas – and these figures are higher for Māori
  - Difficulties with connective technology impact the wellbeing of rural people. Poor connectivity increases the risk that people will struggle to get help, advice and support; and older people in rural settings are even less likely to be online.
  - Access to healthcare services in rural areas of Aotearoa can be uneven, having a significant impact on the wellbeing of rural people. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated pre-existing challenges across healthcare services, including mental health services.
  - The closure of places which act as social hubs in rural areas, such as schools and libraries, had large impacts on communities.
  - The arrival of COVID-19 in Aotearoa compounded the stress farmers and growers were already experiencing. Although there were high levels of resilience evident in the agricultural systems and the people running them, lockdown presented additional pressure and difficulties.
14. The strength and agency of rural communities has been evident through the pandemic. By working together, and engaging with government agencies and

resources, rural communities took practical action to protect and support themselves.

- Connectedness and belonging are key components of wellbeing that have supported people in rural communities over the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Innovation and transformation, flexibility and collaboration were evident features of rural hospital and health service responses to the pandemic.
- Strong local connections are a source of strength and support in rural communities; and this is highlighted in Māori and Pacific rural communities.

15. The nature of the impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of rural communities has evolved, and will continue to evolve, over the course of the pandemic – life has not 'returned to normal' and the need for support has not gone away.

### **Recommendations / Call for action**

16. Decision-making about responding to crises and supporting rural wellbeing more broadly, must be done in partnership with Māori in accordance with Te Tiriti o Waitangi and inclusive of Māori leadership.

- Future pandemic planning must ensure Māori can meaningfully participate and direct pandemic efforts from the base of their iwi and hapū, guided by tikanga and kawa. The relationship of Māori to the land, the centrality of marae in many rural communities, and the inextricable intertwining of whenua and whakapapa, means that mana whenua must be central to political decision-making.

17. There are many challenges faced by rural communities, particularly farming communities, which are fundamentally different from those faced by urban Aotearoa. Planning and providing services and supports need to reflect this.

- The pandemic shone a light on pre-existing stressors and inequities, further compounding the impact of these on rural people's wellbeing. There is an urgent need to improve connectivity and digital infrastructure for rural communities, target support for rural healthcare, and support mental health and social service providers in wellbeing promotion
- 'Rural-proofing' policies, to ensure that government action will work for rural communities, needs to be done, and done well.
- However, rural communities are a heterogenous group and COVID-19 impacts differently on different communities. Rural communities need to be involved in planning and decision-making.

18. Research into rural wellbeing is urgently needed.

- Much of the published information that exists is focused on farmers and farming communities, with less focused on other parts of the rural community.
- The lack of data and evidence to support wellbeing of rural communities urgently needs to be addressed.
- We know that some populations, including Māori and older people, are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. An intersectional approach to research is needed to better understand the impact, so that efforts can be targeted and effective.

## Attached outputs

### The Summary report

19. A short report, this paper outlines the highlights of the methodology and findings and focuses on the conclusions of our research.
20. The audience for this paper is the broader public, including stakeholders, to make the case for a broader understanding of wellbeing and the pandemic's impacts.

### The Technical report

21. A full ~30-page report, this paper provides the methodology, findings, and conclusions, with references. This paper is for anyone who wants to understand the analysis and findings in greater detail.

### Communications Plan

22. A high-level communications plan is attached for your information. Key points are:
  - A media release will support publication of the reports, and a LinkedIn post will be made alongside publication
  - Te Hiringa Mahara will front any media interest
  - No media appearances are planned, but Dr Filippo Katavake-McGrath, Director Wellbeing System Leadership, will be the Te Hiringa Mahara spokesperson for any media interest.

### Next Steps

23. The media release, key messages, and a Q&A have been drafted and will be shared with your office before the publication date.
24. Subject to minor editorial changes, on 14 February, the Summary and Technical reports will be published to the Te Hiringa Mahara website, the media release will be sent to news media, and an announcement posted to LinkedIn.