

Updated advice on draft Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy: February 2026

We welcome the opportunity to review the draft Strategy since our previous advice and provide further advice before it goes to Cabinet.

Our previous proactive advice: May to June 2025

In May 2025, in line with our mandated role and following discussion with the Ministry of Health, we agreed to work with the Ministry during drafting of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy as well as provide written advice directly to the Minister for Mental Health. Formal advice was to be provided at two key points in the development of the Strategy: in response to the draft Strategy before it went to Cabinet for consultation in June 2025, and the second after the public consultation originally planned for August 2025.

Following delays in preparing the draft Strategy, the Commission's Board decided to prepare proactive advice on the Strategy which was provided to the Minister for Mental Health and the Ministry, on 27 May 2025.

Our proactive advice specified the need to see a Strategy that:

1. inspires hope and change with leadership at every level
2. outlines a future with concrete, measurable objectives
3. provides a shared view of what a good mental health and addiction system looks like to drive progress
4. features cross-government and preventative actions to improve mental health and wellbeing
5. and takes a coordinated approach to bring together government strategies and plans that address mental health.

Key to our advice was our first system performance report, subsequently published in June 2025, and the six key system shifts needed to achieve improved mental health and wellbeing outcomes for people.

We then received the first draft Strategy and provided further advice building on the proactive advice on 6 June 2025. This advice highlighted key points that arose when considering alignment of the draft Strategy with our proactive advice. This included a call for increased investment in Kaupapa Māori services, and effort to address the disproportionate need experienced by Māori. We also provided specific feedback on the Commission's role.

The updated Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy: February 2026

Following the introduction of the Healthy Futures (Pae Ora) Amendment Act in 2025, which included changes to the requirements for various health strategies, development of the Strategy was delayed by approximately six months.

The Strategy has now been updated, and the public consultation period is due to begin in late March to early April, following Cabinet approval. We have been given the opportunity to comment on the draft Strategy before it goes to Cabinet.

Initial feedback and engagement took place between the Commission and the Ministry team on 4 February. High-level advice that reflects the points below was provided.

Assessment of the updated Strategy

The updated draft Strategy is more hopeful and responds to our advice

The updated draft Strategy overall is much improved and reflects much of the May and June advice we provided, shaped by our System Performance Report and the six system shifts it describes. We are pleased to see alignment with the system performance framework and the system shifts needed to achieve improved outcomes.

Lived experience is now evident throughout the Strategy, as is Clinical leadership and workforce. We also support the focus on enablers. The link to other strategies has been made clearer, and strategic objectives and measures are now included. Each of the six shifts are reflected:

6. Prevention and early intervention (System performance shift 3)
7. Increased access to support (System performance shift 4)
8. Improved effectiveness (System performance shifts 1, 2 and 4)
9. Workforce (System performance shifts 1 and 6)

While the strategy doesn't specifically speak to realising the potential of lived experience, focusing on the highest need, or human rights-based practices as fundamental pillars, all of these are included in the Strategy at a vision and/or action level. Most of the measures we asked to be covered have been included. This will greatly support our monitoring and oversight role.

Some gaps remain in the updated draft Strategy

Effort to address determinants of mental wellbeing are limited to wrap around support for tāngata whaiora as opposed to a population level focus on determinants. However, it is good to see action toward the early years and youth. While the vision is that "All New Zealanders are supported in the ways they need to thrive and experience positive mental health and wellbeing alongside positive physical health",

the actions all relate to health service responses, as opposed to across sectors or services.

Effort to support Māori leadership and to address inequitable need faced by Māori is very limited. Māori are highlighted in the descriptions of need, and improved Māori outcomes are outlined in the desired future state, but efforts targeted to Māori are not in the actions responding to this need.

There is an information gap at the system level that needs addressing through the Strategy. While there are references to self-reported outcome and experience measures, it is not clear how the strategy will address these gaps at a system level. In addition, we would like to see a national mental health research strategy to support ongoing knowledge generation at a national level, akin to the Health Research strategy. It was good to see measures on drug checking as preventative measures, however a measure of reduced harm from AOD is needed. This information gap could be addressed under the effectiveness objective as a key action.

There is limited information about how the actions will be delivered and funded. We would assume this information will be included in an implementation plan, but this should be clearer.

The Strategy identifies the need for legislative settings and practice changes that reduce coercive practices, but this does not seek the end of coercive practices will end (and they are not being prohibited under the upcoming Mental Health Bill). We would expect to see the Strategy go further, and address this.

Our ongoing monitoring role

We will continue to independently assess, and report on progress toward shared system goals and the contribution to improved mental health and wellbeing outcomes for people. The system performance monitoring report provides evidence on system performance, identifies opportunities for system improvement and monitors progress towards issues identified in He Ara Oranga and Kia Manawanui. Our next system performance monitoring report is planned for publication in May 2026.