

15 July 2020

Personal details removed for proactive release

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I refer to your email of 17 June 2020 in which you request the following under the Official Information Act 1982 (OIA):

- "1. What proportion of the workforce had flexible working arrangements/were working from home prior to Covid-19? Under Level 4? Under Level 3? Under Level 2? Now under level 1?"*
- 2. Copies of emails from Cabinet or the office of the Minister to chief executives and from chief executives to staff regarding working from home arrangements under level 1.*
- 3. Copies of emails, reports and surveys regarding staff and managers' experience of working from home and any measures of productivity carried out."*

I have numbered your questions for ease of response.

1. During COVID-19 Alert Level 4, 75 percent of New Zealand-based staff worked from home and 25 percent of staff worked from government offices performing essential services. This remained the same during COVID-19 Alert Level 3.

Flexible work arrangements, including arrangements broader than working from home, have been available prior to the COVID-19 Alert Level framework and throughout COVID Alert Levels 2 and 1. Flexible working arrangements are agreed between managers and staff. There is no current central tracking of flexible working arrangements, so we are not able to confirm the proportion of the workforce with flexible work arrangements that include arrangements to work from home during Alert Levels 1 and 2. As this information is not centrally held, we are refusing your request under section 18(e) of the OIA. However, we can confirm there has been a significant and sustained increase in staff taking up working from home under both Alert Levels 2 and 1, relative to the pre-COVID-19 Alert Level period. Further, approximately 70% of staff are currently working in the Ministry's Wellington CBD office on any given day.

2. Attached in Annex 1 is an email regarding working from home arrangements for the return to COVID-19 Alert Level 1. It was delivered to all staff in New Zealand by the Deputy Chief Executive (People and Operations), rather than the Chief Executive, but has been included.

3. Attached in Annex 2 is an email regarding a senior leader's perspective on staff and managers' experiences of working from home. Reports and surveys (questions attached in Annex 3) of staff and managers' experience of working from home and any measures of productivity are underway, but have not yet been completed at the time of your request.

Please note that this letter (with your personal details redacted) may be published on the Ministry's website.

You have the right under section 28(3) of the OIA to seek a review of this response by the Ombudsman.

Yours sincerely

Julie-Anne Lee
for Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Annex 1 – email to all New Zealand-based staff from Deputy Chief Executive, People and Operations

Sent: Monday, 8 June 2020 3:36 PM

Subject: Alert Level 1 changes - with effect Midnight tonight

Kia ora tātou

As you may have heard the Government has announced that New Zealand will move to Alert Level 1 settings taking effect immediately.

That means that the social distancing and gathering requirements under Alert Level 2 are gone. Apart from border restrictions and contact tracing provisions life is moving pretty much back to normal - albeit under our own Aotearoa bubble.

What does that mean for us?

In our New Zealand buildings this means that we will be returning to life in the office – but not immediately, and not as it was pre-lockdown.

The changes we had to make to our New Zealand buildings to accommodate physical distancing under Alert Level 2 means we had to rearrange the desk set ups and not all are therefore available to use straight away (e.g. a number do not have screens or docking stations or both).

So - please - **talk to your manager about when you come back to the office.** Desk numbers are still limited. Divisional Managers will be getting information in the next 24 hours about what desks will be available and when. Please have that conversation with your manager about your next steps. We have some FAQs about Level 1 that you might find useful.

Life has changed

The international COVID response has had a challenging effect on how we accommodate everyone at the same time in our buildings. Since early this year we have had people return from posts, we have more people in country now than ever because of travel restrictions, teams have expanded we have had a number of new hires. We now physically don't have enough desks for everyone to be at work at the same time in our New Zealand buildings.

This means that the neighbourhood style of working will remain. Desk sharing will continue – in most cases you will not have your own personal desk every day. Your role may still have an element of flexible working in it – again this is a conversation you need to have with your manager.

As part of this move to be more adaptable we need to make sure that those of us who might work more frequently from home in future have the right tools to do so. Much of the Ministry owned equipment that you may have taken home or were issued with at the beginning of the lockdown will be more suited for the office environment. If you are likely to work remotely more frequently in future we will be swapping out that Ministry office equipment for items more suited for home use.

Thank you

I understand that this is not the perfect solution and we have some way to go before we can reach a more "normal" way of working.

I want to personally thank all of you for your patience and resilience through everything. The Ministry is working as quickly as possible to find the future way of working that means we can meet our goals and business needs while continuing to attract the best people and be flexible enough to respond to any crisis thrown at us.

I also want to take this opportunity to acknowledge those out in our post network, many of which are still operating with restrictions and lockdowns arrangements. The move to Alert Level 1 in New Zealand will help all of us to continue to support you.

Ngā mihi

Audrey

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Annex 2 – blog by Deputy Chief Executive, Policy

COVID-19 Update 34: Ben King, DCE Policy – Flexible working in a COVID-19 world

21/05/2020 12:00 a.m.

As the SLT Champion for the Flexible Work Network, I've been reflecting on how our experiences working remotely because of COVID-19, both positive and negative, will inform the Ministry's approach to flexible work, including our Flexible Work Policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented us with many challenges, which we have all strived to manage or adapt to as best we can. Almost all Ministry staff, partners and families have had to deal with some degree of lockdown measures that have brought significant changes to our daily lives. For most of us, flexible working including through working from home, working different hours, and working for different agencies or contributing to All of Government teams, became the new normal.

Early on, the rapidly changing COVID-19 situation necessitated a swift business continuity response at posts in China, then in Europe, and in New Zealand and across the global network as the pandemic was declared. Collectively, we successfully rose to the challenge. Within a short space of time people who needed a Ministry mobile device received one. 364 laptops, phones and iPads were issued as New Zealand's lockdown was announced. With the majority of staff working from home, the demand on our network vastly increased, and our IMD teams worked hard to increase the capacity of our network accordingly. On 13 May, we had a record 903 people logging on remotely – up from around 50 per day prior to COVID-19.

Zoom also arrived in the Ministry with a splash. Zoom enabled teams to continue business and connect regularly, just as they would in the office, maybe fostering even deeper connections as many of us met our colleagues' children and pets. While some meetings have been strictly business, Zoom has also facilitated virtual morning tea chats, many a five minute quiz, and I've heard rumours of the odd after work drink. The weekly Ministry Issues Meetings have also been conducted via Zoom, which is something we couldn't have imagined last year. We've had up to 91 log-ins for our weekly MIM via Zoom. One final statistic: pre-COVID, MFAT held fewer than 250 meetings on Zoom each month. In April 2020, we convened almost 6,750 Zoom meetings.

As noted above, flexible working isn't just about working from home. We have had to adapt to ourselves and our colleagues working at unconventional times and in different ways, as we have juggled priorities at home. And we know it's not been easy working, managing home-schooling and providing support to vulnerable housemates and family members. ECC staff have been rostered on shifts, 24 hours a day, seven days a week – including a graveyard shift, which takes its toll on well-being and family life.

While some have enjoyed working from home and have found it to be productive, it's important to acknowledge that not all of us have found this period of working flexibly to be smooth sailing. Anyone who would normally separate their various commitments such as work, children and parents, may have found themselves with divided attention, feeling unable to deliver adequately, or to be as productive as usual.

For some of our offshore colleagues and New Zealand-based contractors, the limited access to MFAT systems and mobile devices has been a hindrance, despite the huge efforts made to provide people with what they need to work from home. And we know that in some posts mobile working is little more than a fantasy. There are a number of reasons for this, including some people's roles requiring them to be physically present at the post.

For many people, working from home over an extended period has been a drawback. Reduced interaction with colleagues and the absence of the buzz of the office may have reduced their sense of productivity or, just as significantly, their sense of connection to their work community. The high volume of email traffic also illustrates some of the challenges of large numbers of staff working remotely. Pre-COVID we averaged around 70,000 emails per day – early in the lockdown, MFAT networks processed 450,000 emails in a single day. Most of us will have experienced how challenging this was to manage. And I think we've all been reminded that it takes longer to write an email than to walk across to a colleague's desk for a quick discussion. And it certainly takes longer to work through a much fuller inbox.

We've also been reminded how much of our work is done through our daily physical interactions through our informal chats, crossing paths in the lifts, hallways, or the kitchen. For the time we were unable to do this, we can acknowledge that our productivity suffered. And we know that the longer the lockdown continued, the more it would impact on connections, relationship management, team dynamics and organisational culture.

In summary, although flexible working has been operational at MFAT for some time, the unprecedented response that COVID-19 required has proven MFAT's capability and capacity to have a significant number of staff work flexibly in a crisis.

As an organisation our technical capacity has increased, and as a community, it's good that our mind set and approach to working flexibly has expanded and now incorporates ways of working we might not have imagined before.

As we slowly establish our "new normal" in MFAT, the Senior Leadership Team is focused on supporting the ongoing development of a happy, healthy and high performing community for all within the Ministry. Part of this will come through returning to our pre COVID operational settings, the majority of which served us so well. ...[Out of scope]...And we know there will be lessons to be applied to our work practices, including the positives and limitations that we've experienced through our flexible work experiences.

One of the areas where our recent experiences will have immediate application will be the Ministry's Flexible Work Policy. We remain absolutely committed to releasing our Flexible Work Policy. But we want to ensure that the policy takes account of the new possibilities and the limitations that our experience has illuminated over recent weeks. Our intention is to take a fresh look at the policy with this in mind – and also to ensure the policy takes account of new State Services Commission guidelines on Flexible Work, which we expect to be promulgated over the coming weeks.

Annex 3 – Survey Questions to staff

Your well-being

These questions are to help us get a picture of staff well-being. We will repeat these questions periodically to see how we are tracking. All responses are anonymous.

*** 1. Are you located off shore or based in New Zealand**

- Offshore at post
- New Zealand
- Seconded, but returned to NZ due to COVID-19

*** 2. How are you feeling this week?**

Not great Ok Great

*** 3. I feel supported and valued**

- Always
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

*** 4. I'm regularly in touch with my work colleagues and friends**

- Always
- Usually
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

*** 5. The Ministry cares about the wellbeing of its people**

- Agree
- Strongly agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

*** 6. The Ministry could support me more during this time by**

[text box response]

Your views on working away from the office

The Ministry is considering its policies and guidelines around flexible working. Working away from the office is one aspect of this. These questions will help us get a sense of

staff preferences and views on the benefits and drawbacks of working away from the office. All responses are anonymous.

*** 7. In a typical working week outside of a crisis response, how much would you ideally like to work in the office vs away from the office?**

- Mostly away from the office
- About half and half
- Mostly in the office
- Always in the office

*** 8. What do you consider the benefits of working away from the office for you and your role? (Select as many as apply)**

- Better work/life balance
- Fewer interruptions/distractions than in the office
- I feel more productive
- My physical work environment is better away from the office
- My technical set up is better away from the office
- Online meetings are more efficient
- No commute
- Connecting with colleagues at different posts/offices

*** 9. What do you consider the drawbacks of working away from the office for you and your role? (Select as many as apply)**

- Poorer work/life balance
- More interruptions/distractions than in the office
- I feel less productive
- My physical work environment is better in the office
- My technical work environment is better in the office
- In-person meetings are more efficient
- Some team tasks are not suited to remote working
- Lack of social connection with colleagues

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