

How New Zealand eliminated COVID-19

New Zealand is free of COVID-19. Joe Stockman (LSE), who worked on the country's COVID-19 response, describes how decisiveness, a successful communications strategy, a committed civil service and a degree of luck enabled it to return quickly to normal life.

New Zealand has (twice) effectively eliminated COVID-19, and is heading into a summer of BBQs, musical festivals, and packed cricket stadiums – in stark contrast to the winter of discontent gripping Europe and the UK. How did this ill-prepared Pacific island nation beat the virus? By acting decisively, communicating clearly, being a little lucky, and by taking advantage of a particular strength.

In 2019, New Zealand was [ranked 35th](#) in the world for its pandemic preparedness, behind Indonesia and South Africa. An indebted and decentralised public health system, led by a workish Ministry of Health, had demonstrated its limitations with a lacklustre response to a measles outbreak in 2019. Simply put, New Zealand was ill-prepared for COVID-19.

Two weeks after confirming its first case in late February, and when the WHO finally declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, community transmission was starting to occur across the country and the public health system began to creak. Unlike Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea, New Zealand hadn't been affected by SARS and MERS and had therefore not learnt the lessons its Asian neighbours had. Regional public health units could not possibly track and trace close contacts quickly enough to get in front of rapidly spreading transmission. By 26 March it was clear that the epidemic was on track to overwhelm the health system and cause thousands of deaths. New Zealand had no choice but to enter a stringent nationwide lockdown.

This was the first key step towards New Zealand's success. Leaders accepted that the country was ill-prepared, and that the health system could not withstand the coming onslaught. A no-nonsense assessment of the situation found New Zealand lacking – and it had to “go hard and go early” (in the parlance of the Prime Minister), if it was to weather the coming storm.



Canterbury, New Zealand. Photo: [jjjj56cp](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Then came the second step – a clear, concise, and massive communications campaign, designed not just to inform, but to recruit every New Zealander into a collective effort to '[Unite Against COVID-19](#)'. A 'Wall of Yellow' engulfed billboards and social media feeds, while clearly branded leaflets were distributed to every city, town and mailbox in the country.

The Prime Minister and Director-General of Health appeared each afternoon on TV, giving detailed updates and repeating important information over and over again. Key messages ('Stay Home – Save Lives') were translated into dozens of languages, and were pushed out to communities through churches, mosques, community leaders and social media influencers. A clear Alert Level system was publicised, with graduated levels of response based on the threat being faced, and simple, understandable rules and restrictions that came along with them. National broadcasters were required to carry COVID-19 updates and information, and a dedicated website set out clear rules with easy to understand explanations.

New Zealand's approach was a perfect expression of the [Mayfields' model of communication](#) – direction giving; meaning making; and empathy. The leadership gave clear direction, they consistently explained the why behind their decisions and actions, they gave meaning and expression to what was happening, and they did all of these things with empathy and compassion.

While the communications strategy rolled out, the lockdown came into full effect. All non-essential work stopped, including construction and manufacturing. Schools closed and even surfing was banned. A coffee-loving nation went without its flat whites for five weeks while cafes and restaurants completely shut their doors. Just petrol stations, supermarkets and medical centres stayed open. Billions had to be pumped into the economy – largely through a wage subsidy scheme designed to keep people in jobs as much as possible.

Empty A380s landed at airports around the country as tens of thousands of foreign nationals, mostly tourists on dream holidays, were airlifted back to their home countries. And an evolving system of Managed Isolation and Quarantine was deployed at the border to stop returning New Zealanders from bringing the virus back in.

However, even at this stage, New Zealand had not yet adopted an elimination strategy. That only occurred later, when the lockdown appeared to be working better than could possibly be expected, and the Prime Minister realised that anything less than elimination wouldn't be enough to protect the healthcare system. Flattening the curve was abandoned in favour of crushing it completely.

Seven weeks later lockdown lifted, and New Zealand began to emerge into a new normal. After 103 days COVID-19 had been eliminated. New Zealanders had trusted in their political leaders, their scientific experts (who had been vocal critics and provocateurs of government policy) and as a 'team of 5 million' plucky underdogs, had got the job done. Polling at the end of lockdown showed remarkably high levels of public trust in government, social cohesion, and a growing sense of national pride.

There was, no doubt, a healthy pinch of luck and some useful built-in settings that contributed to New Zealand's success. Being an island nation at the bottom of the world can be a lonely existence – but during a pandemic, it certainly has its advantages.

But there's one more thing that contributed critically to New Zealand's success. This was a professional, humble and dedicated civil service, experienced in disaster, and willing to work hard, pragmatically, and most importantly, together. While the world has had a poor 2020, New Zealand had a shocking 2019. The Christchurch mosque terror attack killed 51 worshippers, and a volcanic eruption killed 22 tourists. The previous years were hardly better, with massively destructive earthquakes, and a major mine explosion.

The upshot, however, was a civil service primed to respond to crisis. A well-practiced and shared response structure – the [Coordinated Incident Management System](#) (CIMS) was stood up, and a cohort of experienced civil servants were on hand to tackle each COVID-19 challenge as it emerged. The visible success of the political leadership was built on the foundation of a highly-trusted and world class bureaucracy.

New Zealand is now bathing in the warm afterglow of a successful response. The economy has [outperformed all expectations](#), with nominal GDP now projected to be \$48 billion higher than expected by 2024, and the government's books are looking \$10 billion dollars better than expected. And perversely, the housing market has again caught fire, in part fuelled by cashed-up expats returning to the safety of New Zealand's island refuge.

However, New Zealand is – and for the foreseeable future, will remain – cut off from the rest of the world. Stunted efforts to open a 'travel bubble' with Australia have failed, with endless minor outbreaks on both sides of the Tasman sea. For now, New Zealand's borders remain closed to almost everyone except residents and citizens, and even they must spend 14 days in a government-run hotel-facility before they can enter the community.

Until a substantial proportion of Kiwis are vaccinated, New Zealanders will have to enjoy their freedoms inside their 'paradise in a prison cell'. But I'm sure they don't really mind.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.