



Te Kawa Mataaho

Public Service Commission

14 August 2025

Rhys Hurley
New Zealand Taxpayers' Union
rhys@taxpayers.org.nz

Dear Rhys

Official Information Request Our Ref: OIA 2025-0014

I refer to your official information request received on 17 July 2025 for:

"A copy of any comments or additional notes and summaries or analysis prepared for or by the Public Service Commission under the stakeholder engagement heading focused on:

- Communication to/with the public, where commentary relates to Official Information Act (OIA)*
- Engagement with Ministers*

We are specifically seeking any versions or excerpts of this commentary where agency-identifying details have been removed but the substantive insights remain intact".

Information being released

Please find enclosed the following documents:

Item	Date	Document Description	Decision
1	July 2025	Comments from Te Taunaki Public Service Census (the Census) related to communication to/with the public, where commentary relates the Official Information Act 1982 (the OIA)	Release in part
2	July 2025	Comments from the Census related to engagement with Ministers	Release in part

I have decided to release the relevant parts of the documents listed above, subject to information being withheld under the following sections of the Official Information Act 1982 (the OIA):

- section 9(2)(ba)(i) – to protect information which is subject to an obligation of confidence or which any person has been or could be compelled to provide under the authority of any enactment, where the making available of the information would be likely to prejudice the supply of similar information, or information from the same source, and it is in the public interest that such information should continue to be supplied.

- section 9(2)(g) – to maintain the effective conduct of public affairs through the free and frank expression of opinions by or between or to Ministers of the Crown or members of an organisation or officers and employees of any public service agency or organisation in the course of their duty.

In addition, information has been deleted where it is not within the scope of your request.

If you wish to discuss this decision with us, please feel free to contact Enquiries@publicservice.govt.nz.

You have the right to seek an investigation and review by the Ombudsman of this decision. Information about how to make a complaint is available at www.ombudsman.parliament.nz or freephone 0800 802 602.

Please note that we intend to publish this letter (with your personal details removed) and enclosed documents on the Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission's website.

Yours sincerely



Nicky Dirks

Manager – Ministerial and Executive Services
Te Kawa Mataaho Public Service Commission

Part one: 'Communication to/with the public, where commentary relates to Official Information Act (OIA)'

1. More willingness to refuse or charge for OIA requests where clearly unreasonable amount of information requested. (Eg recent OIA had [#] tranches, each of close to 1000 pages). That is a fishing request not a genuine use of the OIA. And streamline sign out processes so does not need to be cleared by 4 different people (including at senior levels).
2. The public service is also risk averse. OIA reform would help with this.
3. more transparency when responding to OIAs or Ministerial questions.
4. Coming from the private sector I have found the agency a culture shock, their focus is internal stakeholders, hierarchy and avoiding OIA's, not the NZ Public.
5. I think there's a big opportunity to invest in AI systems that could take the burden of briefing, WPQs, Ministerials, and even OIA responses off officials, leaving us to focus on bigger issues. It would likely involve using AI tools to produce first drafts, which are then checked for sense and accuracy by policy staff, but would remove a significant burden off staff. It would require an up front investment to develop the software, but would pay dividends over years. More fundamentally, the Official Information Act needs to be reviewed. It's a massive burden on staff responding to an increasing number of requests. We all believe in transparency and accountability, but an Act passed by Parliament in 1982 cannot be fit for purpose in the 2025 information environment. The current arrangements produce risks around (a) taking already stretched policy staff away from their core jobs and (b) you can imagine hypothetical situations where free and frank advice is not being given to Ministers or senior officials for fear of it being released out of context. These two areas feel like opportunities to increase the productivity, innovation, and efficiency of the public service. With care, this could be achieved without compromising on transparency and accountability mechanisms, and potentially even increase confidence in our public service/institutions.
6. Improved support for Ministerial Services - properly paid, resourced and recognised as a dedicated profession (I.e. not managed by business managers/directors with limited knowledge of the application of the OIA or Privacy Act) - to ensure timely OIA, PA, PQ and Ministerial Correspondence as statutory requirements and support of a transparent & democratic Government.
7. Ministerials and OIA requests are hugely time consuming for all Govt Departments. There should be a cost recovery process which may discourage the repeat requesters.
8. The OIA process without checks and balances is stopping free and frank written communication from flowing freely. People have become more risk adverse and afraid something written in context and innocently can be taken out of context.

Part two: 'Engagement with Ministers'

1. My employer does a bad job at ensuring its employees act in a politically neutral way. This is in part due to a bias towards diversity of person, and a bias against diversity in thought.
2. Free, frank and fair advice to the minister does not appear to be a priority. Papers sent up do not seem to be based on evidence.
3. *If Management gave us the opportunity to do our job without so many sharp cuts in our budget* We are finding we are not being effective in our service to our Ministers by not providing our normal required service. The Ministers are taking to looking after themselves as using the service from us is just not like it used to be.
4. A complete lack of free and frank advice to Ministers.
5. A lot of time and energy is spent making results palatable for Ministers, rather than presenting facts.
6. Additional resourcing/staffing to help teams deliver timely and quality advice to Ministers, and other services.
7. being clearer with Ministers what we can and cannot do with the resources available (i.e. agreeing trade offs rather than doing many things not well).
8. Any Government agency that is funded by the taxpayer should not be politicized in accordance with personal opinions and instead should always remain politically neutral regardless of which political party is in power nationally and internationally.
9. SLT needs to be bolder and less risk-averse in allowing free and frank advice, otherwise we risk giving Ministers sub-standard advice or allowing other agencies with stronger advice that we dont agree with to have the upper hand.
10. Be willing to be frank with ministers but with an open mind.
11. Being a government employee, changes take place when a new Government takes over. This is a reality of the work that I do, and I have developed a way of adapting to changes.
12. Being able to provide more free and frank advice - there is a growing shift to a yes to whatever the Minister says rather than being able to provide free and frank advise on a topic requested by the Minister to inform robust discussion. Senior leadership seem scared to do what is right by providing the actual risks Ministers actually signing papers - feels like there is limited accountability for the decisions they make and therefor public servants are not protected by the advice they have given.
13. Being clearer with Ministers and employees about the work that matters the most, based on evidence, for the organisation to focus on, to improve outcomes for New Zealanders (and sticking with those choices).
14. Being politically neutral. This organisation seems to believe that neutrality means giving advice that the Minister wants to hear and parroting their views rather than actual neutrality of giving evidence-based advice and recommendations regardless of the politics with the understanding that if the Govt wishes to pursue a different tack, that we will do our best to implement their wishes in spite of our advice to the contrary. We do not do this. We instead shift our position to mirror what we think the govt of the day wants to hear.
15. Free and frank advice to the Minister.
16. Better implementation of prioritisation decisions so that if we say something is not a priority, we dont do that work, and we feel comfortable saying as much to Ministers. At the moment we deprioritise (and remove staff resources accordingly) but then still end up doing work in that area (eg providing briefing etc). Might be a good result for taxpayers, but it is at the expense of staff health and wellbeing, and a diversion from delivering on our key priorities.

17. We have too many Directors and DCEs and they need to be reduced so that we can get (back to?) to a model where: - the managers and analysts that actually do the work are able to present free and frank advice and generate new ideas.
18. Better management of Ministers expectations / more push-back from senior leaders about what is able to be delivered in available timeframes - or increased resourcing (or potentially just better management of resourcing across organisations) to manage within tight timeframes.
19. Allowed to give free and frank advice to the government of the day - currently everyone is running around like headless chickens to try and accommodate increasing workload.
20. My organisation should be doing more to identify what is highest priority for Ministers and to deliver its core functions & stewardship roles, and manage down the need to deliver other (non-priority) work.
21. We have the public spotlight and government of the day pressure on us all the time, required to deliver with very little time to implement large changes, using systems which are not suited to the role.
22. Bring back free and frank advice.
23. Maintaining, developing and holding to(!) forward looking view to inform strategic and policy advice to Ministers to help address NZs many longstanding challenges.
24. Upskilling peoples core policy skillsets around analysis and writing for Ministers.
25. Clearer roles and responsibilities, and clear commissioning of work and work programs up front to ensure work meets Ministers expectations and is realistically achievable in the timeframes, and prevent wasted effort/re-work.
26. committed to the current Governments plan.
27. Continue to educate staff on the principles of being a political neutral public servant.
28. Delivering free and frank advice to Ministers. On several occasions, advice developed by technical experts has been reshaped entirely to better suit the Ministers agenda on the basis of forming a trusted relationship. This advice has been accepted at face value by the Minister and resulted in poorly informed / confirmatory decision-making.
29. More free and frank, accurate advice, sufficiently consulted rather than closely held.
30. Dont limit ourselves to only free and frank advice we should be actively challenging their assumptions and offering suggestions that would deliver their goals but more efficiently.
31. Apply strict rules on being politically neutral, staff should not be allowed to promote their political propaganda at work.
32. Encourage employees to deliver free and frank advice.
33. Ensuring that advice that is free and frank so that Ministers can make quality decisions after thoughtful consideration of the range of risks and consequences. Not that this never happens but sometimes risks/potential consequences of policies are downplayed or insufficiently tabled/explored in the interests of expedient decision making.
34. Feeling able to give free and frank advice to Ministers so that our leadership doesnt continually overpromise and expect everyone to work at a high level, well outside their contracted hours, continuously.
35. significant time and energy is devoted to ensuring advice "lands well" with Ministers, which involves a lot of second-guessing what they will or wont think. There is a distinction between providing helpful advice that proactively addresses specific, known points of interest, concern etc, and tailoring our advice to find a politically palatable landing zone for Ministers (which as

public servants I don't often think we are always terribly good at anyway - Ministers are professional politicians and we are not).

36. some of the interagency architecture set up under the new Public Service Act lacks alignment with the views of the new government and therefore lack a mandate to line agencies from the portfolio minister.
37. more courage providing advice to Ministers.
38. Free and frank advice to Ministers, I think some briefings written well but sometimes say absolutely nothing.
39. GMs and other direct contacts with Ministers need to be freer and franker with their advice and have more robust dialogue with their Minister, so that they can be clearer on their request/s before disseminating parcels of work to departments and advisors etc.
40. BIMs and other briefings should be the start of a Q&A between the Minister and those appointed to advise them.
41. Greater focus on, and understanding of, how to meet our obligation to deliver free and frank advice to ministers while maintaining a constructive relationship with them. Sounds straightforward but isn't. Managers become too focused on telling ministers what they want to hear because they fear disappointing / angering them.
42. Easier reporting to Ministers. Briefs and cabinet packages are lengthy docs that often need at least 5 lots of review/check. Could we shorten these into templated tables for completion and provision to the minister. The Minister could then talk to the subject matter expert if he had any questions.
43. The notion of serving the govt of the day seems to elude some public servants.
44. Have hard conversations with Ministers and manage their expectations, there's less people to do the work - the work hasn't lessened. Be realistic about what can actually be achieved in timeframes that are expected.
45. Honour its own Treaty values (e.g. strong partnerships with Māori) and provide free and frank advice on rights and interests of Māori rather than providing what they think Ministers want to hear.
46. Senior Leaders appear to be dreadful at articulating the work and are more interested in preserving their roles and career prospects than articulating free and frank advice.
47. I believe we as an organization are working in guidance with the elected democratic government of New Zealand. As a public sector organization, we make changes to our policies in line with the ruling elected governments. We as an organization we do our best to deliver better results for New Zealand taxpayers.
48. I equate better delivering the priorities of the Government as delivering better results (i.e. not making a judgement if those will be better results for taxpayers). We haven't fully aligned our resources to the priorities of the new government, as those areas that I would see as priorities of the Government still having the same resources as previously with not shift from areas that are not priorities.
49. A lot of the mahi we do is centered around meeting the needs and requests of government.
50. As a public servant, I am politically neutral. I will do my job to the best of my ability regardless of who is in office, and I will not let my political affiliations affect the work that I do.

51. I question the trend of recent years for the public service to present as having a vision for New Zealand. Visions are for political parties and can be accepted or rejected at the ballot box. In my view, it is a trend that greatly harms the public service.
52. There is too much desire to please (not just serve) Ministers, and too much unwillingness to continue as we always have until we are told otherwise.
53. I work in a policy team providing frequent advice to Ministers. The main obvious improvement I can think of would be a deliberate focus on ensuring our advice is more free and frank. Currently I believe that a significant amount of our advice is too deferential / careful to avoid saying things that we do not think will align with Ministers' views. Perniciously this is sometimes phrased as a necessary step to initially build trust and confidence with a Minister so that robust advice can be established. I think this is a potentially dangerous approach as deference is no way to actually build a robust and enduring relationship in complex areas where there is scope for reasonable disagreement and that should be dealt with head-on.
54. I would like to see us put more emphasis on free and frank advice and transparent information sharing (especially having the backbone at the top levels to be honest with Ministers and our public sector colleagues, and genuinely backing staff to do the same; rather than paying lip service to a free and frank approach but then throwing staff under the bus if/when shit hits the fan). It feels like the balance has increasingly been tipping in favour of skipping straight to "implement what the Minister wants", rather than "give our genuine free and frank advice on how to solve XYZ problem first, and only after the Minister has actively chosen not to follow that advice do we move to the implement the solution the Minister wants phase". Even when we feel the outcome is inevitable and advising otherwise is pointless, skipping straight to implementing can only result in worse value outcomes and services for New Zealanders, if Ministers aren't getting honest and transparent (albeit uncomfortable) information about the current state of things, and what the consequences of change will be.
55. Improved resourcing of Ministers' offices (including higher remuneration for staff in offices) and better inductions for new Ministers.
56. In my opinion, our role is to deliver what the elected officials want. This work, therefore, is key to a taxpayer-funded democracy.
57. Courage from leadership to give free and frank advice to Ministers.
58. Leaders that lead rather than do and who quickly adjust to Ministers' priorities and alter work programmes quickly in tandem.
59. Leadership that understands Ministers need to be well informed about the costs as well as the benefits of their decisions, including the trade-offs between economic, social and environmental interests. Leadership that understands Ministers are best placed to make these trade-offs on behalf of NZ Inc, rather than the public services.
60. More understanding of the policy cycle and free and frank advice,
61. Less risk aversion and more candid and frank conversations with Ministers.
62. More clarity as to whether tax-payers or Ministers are primary audience.
63. Less focus on ministerial servicing.
64. More of an unwavering commitment to high-quality free and frank advice (with the ultimate benefit to NZ citizens in mind) and less risk-averse censoring of advice to Ministers based on anticipating what advice senior leaders think Ministers will like or dislike.
65. Senior leaders need to be staunch in advice and not watering down advice to appease a Minister's preference, to remain free and frank.

66. Would be useful to get quick turnaround on feedback from the Ministers office on key priorities and key deliverables - and ensure that trickles down to those that are doing the writing.
67. More efficient Cabinet and Parliamentary processes.
68. More people working in Ministerial offices, and higher pay to attract better candidates to these roles.
69. More people, most teams are understaffed for the level of demand from Ministers and the public.
70. More support from senior leaders across the public service for giving truly free and frank advice. Many of our leaders are still risk-averse to doing so. They are not honest enough with Ministers about implications and whats required - whether thats how long it will take to develop thorough advice, or to implement policy etc. So we overpromise and under deliver.
71. My organisation is symptomatic of the broader public service in terms of its high level weaknesses. It has been my observation that the risk adverse nature of our organisation does not lead to the best support to the Govt of the day or outcomes for NZrs. In general, the CEOs across the public service appear to be motivated by their own professional progression or maintaining their senior roles - this culture flows through in many cases to the tier 2 level. This results in a culture of avoiding contentious work and a lot of effort "talking ministers down" from their ambitions - sometimes at the expense of progressing challenging work that may have material positive outcomes for NZ. Playing safe and staying under the radar appears to be the mantra of the public service at the senior level. While the structure of the portfolio arrangements and ministerial delegations do lead to silo mentality, it is fair to say that this is exacerbated by the behaviour and culture of the public service - which often takes an agency approach rather than a broad public service approach. Consequences arising from a program of work that impact on other portfolios are often seen as somebody elses problem and not a Govt / NZ problem. In my view, the policy and process heavy culture of my organisation, and the public service generally, presides over an outcome and can do culture that could better serve the Govt and NZ.
72. There is a new culture of not providing frank and free advice to ministers. Senior managers seem to be worried for their personal careers and dont provide the right advice for fear of falling out with their employers - Government.
73. Needs a turnaround - with more effective leadership and significant investment in change and modernising functions, with a strong involvement/mandate from Ministers to what they want to achieve.
74. not pandering to Ministers by giving them free and frank advice.
75. Not to respond to ministers request at a senior level with a knee jerk reaction, but consult with on the ground related to the issues raised and have them participate in the working party of developing the response to its final draft, so that there is forward and backward planning, review evaluation with real evidence, tested and resourced before implemented. A thorough solution that will be sustainable rather than one that can not be sustained, preventing a waste of taxpayers money for a quick fix.
76. Our changes are implemented by the Government, we dont really get a say as to what changes, we just have to do it.
77. Overall, I think our organisation do a great job to deliver better outcomes for the greater good of NZ. I have stopped watching or reading any articles that relate to our organisation or the wider sector as journalism in this country has a way of portraying a very negative picture of

what we do. One thing that is appreciated, is we have an Executive Leadership team and Minister that back what we do in a challenging environment.

78. Placing senior staff in Ministers offices - especially when the Minister is new. I think we had a lot of issues following the change of government because my organisation placed junior staff in the Ministers offices.
79. Once you are at the level of SLT, they spend all of their time focused on Ministers and how they and their work is being perceived, and very little on productivity. This leads to system that is simultaneously incredibly slow and inefficient but also leading to poor outcomes.
80. The quality of advice is put at risk by senior leaders pre-empting what Ministers want to see and not allowing all options to be presented for consideration - this is not free and frank or politically neutral.
81. Proper dedication to its values, through providing frank and free advice to Ministers with minimal sanitisation and actually maintaining a politically neutral stance in the workplace.
82. Proper prioritisation of workloads, coming from the organisations executive leadership team, including discussing prioritisation and resourcing trade-offs with our Ministers (I work at a government department).
83. I feel like sometimes our leaders mould advice to anticipate our Ministers decision, which in my opinion means that our advice is not completely neutral, although I think our recommendations in advice does tend to be free of political influence.
84. freer and franker conversations with Ministers instead of slavish devotion to not upsetting them.
85. Refine commissioning and reporting from the ministers office down and up. So much time is spent preparing reports.
86. Restore budget/FTE to Ministry as teams are extremely strained for resource to deliver on Ministers priorities as required.
87. Robust leadership, engaging in a meaningful way with Ministers and other sector leaders to get the best possible results based on quality evidence from diverse sources (including accurate internal data regarding performance/resourcing).
88. Senior leadership always acknowledge that we are under the pump, are progressing lots of work at pace, etc - but do nothing about it, and make decisions that compound this problem - they inform Ministers that we are past capacity, but keep accepting new work without adequate reprioritisation/reallocation of resources. We cant, and should not, say No Minister, but public service leaders need to either tell Ministers that other work will stop in order to deliver new priorities, or secure new resources.
89. Its leaders, including in my organisation, are entirely concerned with their own survival and advancement, so they have abandoned any "truth to power" role and now seek only to make Ministers happy at all times.
90. Streamlined processes, I respect that we need to take high care and diligence spending tax payers funds and ensuring delivery of outcomes but the level of detail required takes time which potentially frustrates customers and Ministers in regards to rapidly progressing. Need clarity on level of acceptable risk if there is a desire to move faster, create more delegated authority. Having said the above I also recognise that any mistake can lead to a loss of trust and confidence from both the public and Ministers so it feels like in reality two conflicting drivers.

91. I have also observed a growing reluctance to provide free and frank advice to Government, which hinders Ministers ability to make evidenced decisions and our ability to provide robust advice and alert Ministers to risks.
92. Stronger leadership who can provide free and frank advice to Ministers. My organization sometimes makes decisions based on assumptions about Ministerial direction i.e, preempting direction without seeking it or standing by evidence.
93. Stronger prioritisation discussions with Ministers (reflecting the pressure on delivering, which is at a cost of wellbeing).
94. The manner in which management makes promises to the Minister and causes untold difficulty for staff is terrible. There is a pervasive yes culture in new zealand government which harms employees, wastes money and reinforces the toxic hierarchical "rank and file" system that new zealand government departments and ministries are well known for.
95. Protect independent advice by respecting the free and frank convention- managers and senior managers must not muddle in ministerial advice in attempt of setting the right tone.
96. Our job is to deliver on the Government of the Days agenda - there is limited scope to negotiate/advise on results for taxpayers. Which taxpayers are you prioritising? There will always be a tension and trade-offs will be made to deliver on what a Minister wants (as its ultimately a Ministers decision to make those trade-offs).
97. To actually give free and frank advice to our ministers.
98. Generally advice to Ministers is sound, but there are times when officials get captured by Ministers and/or lack courage to give free and frank advice.
99. Ive seen the erosion of FFA across Public Sector over the years largely driven by fear or favour re: Ministerial reactions.
100. Better communication from the Ministers office.
101. While I can understand that the Ministers time is precious, I see so much wasted resource going into Ministers visits and briefings, updates, and responding to enquiries etc, that the Minister doesnt even need or use!
102. While I still think the Public Service still delivers free and frank advice, I think it has been gradually eroded by risk averse senior leaders who dont want to upset their Minister. While it is the Ministers prerogative to make the decisions they make, I think we have an obligation to them and the New Zealand public to provide that advice that may not align with their view, albeit in a constructive way. I would like to see the principle of free and frank continue to be a core tenet of what we do.
103. willingness to provide more frank advice