PSA
Te Pūkenga Here Tikanga Mahi

Muzzling our watchdogs

The erosion of public accountability in Aotearoa

A research report prepared by the PSA



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Muzzling our watchdogs: The erosion of public accountability in Aotearoa

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Foreword

All New Zealanders have an interest in our country having fair, transparent and functional democratic institutions. Yet over the past three years, we have seen things go backwards.

The Luxon-led Coalition Government has demonstrated a growing impatience with the checks and balances that allow the public, Parliament, unions, experts, hapū and iwi, and communities to properly scrutinise their decisions. Rather than seeing such checks and balances as essential to our democracy, the Government has increasingly treated them as barriers to overcome, or worse, to be removed entirely.

The Coalition Government has pursued a programme of weakening the democratic functions and institutions that hold their power to account. From the shameful Electoral Amendment Act that disenfranchised tens of thousands of voters, to the historically excessive use of parliamentary urgency and the avoidance of select committee scrutiny, our democratic institutions and processes are being deliberately undermined.

This report puts a spotlight on another part of that story; the impact on some of our critical watchdog agencies by Government decisions to impose wide-reaching cuts to public service agencies over successive years. These decisions have been made irrespective of the work demand pressure they have been under.

Our watchdogs are basic democratic infrastructure. They protect people's rights, ensure compliance with Te Tiriti o Waitangi, expose failure, test government action, and give the public confidence that no minister, agency, or institution is above scrutiny. When they are underfunded, ignored, or constrained, accountability is weakened.

That is why this report is of critical importance. It names the pattern, follows the evidence, and makes the democratic stakes clear. It puts the weakening of our watchdogs alongside a wider political project to reduce scrutiny, blunt accountability, and make it harder for the public to challenge power.

A government that believes in accountability needs to fund, respect, and strengthen the institutions that make accountability real. Our watchdogs must be supported, well resourced, and independent; because when they are muzzled, all New Zealanders are put at risk.

Duane Leo, National Secretary

Fleur Fitzsimons, National Secretary

Jack McDonald, Te Kaihautū Māori

Executive summary

This report puts a spotlight on a group of Aotearoa's key independent watchdog agencies that are under pressure from the Government's decisions to limit their funding. It documents the challenges created for these watchdogs by the Government's decisions to impose wide-reaching funding cuts on public sector agencies over successive years, irrespective of the fact that at the same time they face mounting demand pressures in carrying out their vital work. It shows why these agencies matter, what is driving the pressure they are under, and what is at stake if this erosion continues.

Key findings

The new analysis presented in this report shows:

- Underfunding is progressively undermining some of the critical watchdog agencies that New Zealanders rely on to protect their rights, uphold accountability, and safeguard democracy.[1]
- This is happening at precisely the same time these agencies are under unprecedented pressure from rapid technological change, growing public expectations, and growing demand for their services.
- The Government intends to continue to cut the funding available to most of these agencies beyond the 2026/27 financial year, as set out by the Minister of Finance in a November 2025 letter to responsible Ministers.[2]

What's at stake

This puts our democracy at risk. It erodes public accountability and trust in our institutions. It undermines Māori-Crown relations, showing a clear lack of respect for, or in some cases open disdain toward, Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the constitutional foundation of Aotearoa. It undercuts our ability to navigate current and future challenges, such as those introduced by emerging technologies. At stake is our status as a modern, transparent and robust democracy.

Recommendations:

To ensure New Zealanders can be confident our watchdogs have the resources they need to defend our interests, their funding needs to be overseen independently of the institutions they

[1] Based on analysis of data from Estimates of Appropriations for Budgets 2022 – 2026, from Treasury. For further detail see Appendix 1.

[2] The Treasury, *Budget 2024 Information Release*: *4 November 2025 letter from Hon Nicola Willis Minister of Finance to Hon Paul Goldsmith, Minister of Justice*. Accessed at: B26 Invitation Letter - Law and Order Envelope - 4 November 2025 - Budget 2026 Information Release A version of this letter went to all responsible Ministers. The letter did not consider the three Officers of Parliament, whose appropriations are overseen by the Speaker.

scrutinise and taken out of the annual budget cycle. There are existing examples of such arrangements that we can build on.

Currently, most of the watchdogs covered in this report have their budgets set annually by ministers through the budgets process, which means their funding is vulnerable to the whims of the government of the day. However, budgets for our three independent watchdogs[3] are reviewed by the Officers of Parliament Committee,[4] a cross-party parliamentary committee chaired by the Speaker. There are already some appropriations, for example the Appropriations for Parliamentary Purposes,[5] that are reviewed triennially, and for MPs' salaries and allowances that are funded three yearly through a Permanent Legislative Authority.

The next government must:

- Immediately restore funding for watchdogs to levels that reflect increased demand factors and the impact of inflation.
- Address the urgent issues watchdog agencies have identified with our privacy, data and environmental regulation, so as to protect New Zealanders from unnecessary risk and better place us to meet current and future risks and challenges.
- Ensure ongoing independence in budget setting by expanding the scope of The Officers of Parliament Committee, to cover all our watchdogs. Experience has shown that funding for watchdogs with the status of Officers of Parliament tends to hold up compared with those who do not have this status, as the example of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment in this report shows.
- Move to a triennial review of funding for our watchdog agencies following a general election, and funding being paid under Permanent Legislative Authority, as already happens with MPs' salaries. This would take into account the environmental and institutional demand factors that impact each agency.

[3] Those with the status of Officers of Parliament, which includes the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, the Ombudsman and Audit New Zealand.

[4] McGee, David, *Parliamentary Practice in New Zealand*, 2021, p.650. Accessed at: part-7-scrutiny-and-special-procedures-ppnz-2023.pdf. For more about the OPC, see: The Officers of Parliament Committee

[5] The Triennial Review of Appropriations for Parliamentary Purposes by a cross parliamentary Appropriations Review Committee reviews funding for members of Parliament (MPs), political parties, qualifying electoral candidates, communications services, and administrative support delivered by the Parliamentary Service and the Office of the Clerk.

By the numbers

	Change in work demand between 2023 annual report and 2025 annual report[6] (%)	Funding change in real terms[7] since 2023 ($)	Funding change in real terms since 2023 (%)
Office of the Privacy Commissioner	Total privacy complaints received +84% Total privacy breach notifications +30%	-$1,380,000	-15.3%
Human Rights Commission	Enquiries and complaints received and responded to +49% Enquiries and complaints completed or closed +41%	-$2,821,000	-18.5%
Independent Police Conduct Authority	Total complaints received +15% Investigations overseen +7% Investigations concluded +52%	-$701,000	-9.4%
The Waitangi Tribunal	A 2025 review found that, 'as currently configured', the Tribunal 'experiences significant issues in resourcing its hearing programme.' [8]	-$1,780,000	-11.5%
Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment	Reports, commentaries and submissions published +125% Briefings given to members of Parliament +19%	+$99,000	+2%
Health and Disability Commissioner	Number of enquiries received +9% Number of complaints closed +17%	-$2,972,000	-15.9%

[6] Full detail of work demand measures reported attached as Appendix 2.

[7] CPI measured between Q2, 2022 and Q2, 2026. CPI series sourced from Stats NZ Infoshare: CPI All Groups for New Zealand (Qrtly-Mar/Jun/Sep/Dec). Apart from the Health and Disability Commissioner (HDC), 2023/24 & 2026/27 appropriations are taken from corresponding Estimates of Appropriations. For HDC, estimated actuals for the previous year, recorded in Vote Health, are used here in place of Budget appropriations because funding for the HDC is not decided in the Budget for the coming year - the split between entities funded by the Monitoring and Protecting Health and Disability Consumer Interests line is settled afterwards by the Ministry of Health. The figure used here is estimated actual spend for the 2023/24 is taken from Vote Health Estimates of Appropriations 2024/25. **For full details of appropriations and revenue changes see Appendix 1.**

[8] Year on year work demand data is not reported by the Waitangi Tribunal unlike other agencies in this report.

Watchdogs speak out

Officials have repeatedly raised the alarm about the risks that underfunding these critical watchdogs creates:

> "The Authority is the correct forum for members of the Public to address complaints about the police, but increasingly we do not have the resources to manage the volumes of complaints we receive, or to manage the growing volume of generic incident notifications, and public inquiries that must also be assessed."
>
> - Independent Police Conduct Authority, *Annual Report 2024-25*, p.14.[9]

> "The reality is that currently we cannot close as many complaints as we receive."
>
> - Health and Disability Commissioner Morag McDowell, speaking to the Health Select Committee. Quoted by the New Zealand Herald.[10]

> "The savings from this initiative may risk the OPC's ability to respond to major privacy breaches and undertake litigation or prosecution of key privacy issues".
>
> - The Treasury, *Bilateral Briefing: Budget 2024 Justice Sector Multilateral Briefing*.[11]

> "Even when our funding was increased it was to a level below what we had recommended to implement the significant new responsibilities and powers that the Act provided us. Following these increases, high inflation and cost savings measures subsequently diminished our funding in real terms."
>
> - Office of the Privacy Commissioner, *Annual Report 2024/25*, p.14. [12]

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[9] Independent Police Conduct Authority, *Annual Report 2024/25*. October 2025. Accessed at: https://www.ipca.govt.nz/download/169344/IPCA%20Annual%20Report%202024-25.pdf

[10] Davidson, Issac. Health and Disability Commission taking years to investigate complaints amid 'significant pressure'. *The New Zealand Herald*. 15 June 2024. Accessed at: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/health-and-disability-commission-taking-years-to-investigate-complaints-amid-significant-pressure/IUZIWM7VAFFBVOCKMX5OBHYKQ4/

[11] The Treasury, *Budget 2024 Information Release*: *Bilateral Briefing: Budget 2024 Justice Sector Multilateral Briefing*, 19 March 2024. P13. Accessed at: https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2024-09/b24-bilat-just-4933109.pdf

[12] Office of the Privacy Commissioner, *Annual Report 2024/25*. November 2025. Accessed at: Annual-Review-2025-A1132341.pdf Also see: Hanly, Lillian. Office of the Privacy Commissioner could cut 15 percent of workforce, PSA says. *RNZ*. 9 September 2026. Accessed at: https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/politics/1309241/office-of-the-privacy-commissioner-could-cut-15-percent-of-workforce-psa-says

"It is not just the funding - it is the staffing. I find it difficult to appoint tribunals to hear claims because we do not have the numbers... Funds are required for the research, funds are required to enable the claimants to get to the hearings ... and the tribunal is left holding the baby, which won't continue to work."

- Chief Judge Wilson Isaac, former Chair of the Waitangi Tribunal. Quoted by RNZ. [13]

What's at stake: The full picture

Our watchdog agencies are not peripheral parts of government. They are a cornerstone of New Zealand's constitutional system and an essential support to Parliament.[14] Together they form what has been described as the "fourth", or "integrity", branch of government, charged with protecting our constitutional democracy.[15]

Eroding accountability

We depend on these agencies to inform the public whether government has acted lawfully, whether Te Tiriti o Waitangi has been honoured, whether our privacy and other rights have been protected, and whether those in power are being held to account. They are the public's safeguard against abuse, neglect, secrecy, and misuse of power.

Their work is indispensable. Strong watchdogs build public trust. They give people confidence that complaints will be heard, wrongdoing will be investigated, and that no individual or institution is above scrutiny. They reassure us that the rules apply equally to everyone.

But these institutions do not remain strong by accident. When watchdog agencies are starved of resources, overwhelmed by rising workloads, or left without modern legal tools to respond to new technologies, their ability to protect the public begins to weaken. The effects are often gradual and easy to overlook at first. Complaints take longer to resolve. Investigations become harder to undertake. Emerging risks go unchecked.

Eroding public confidence and trust

Over time, the cumulative impact is profound. Public confidence in institutions begins to erode. Accountability gaps widen. Misconduct is less likely to be exposed. Rights are harder to defend. Ultimately, people lose faith that government institutions exist to serve and protect them. That loss of trust is not merely an administrative problem. It weakens the health of our democracy,

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[13] McLachlan, Leigh-Marama. Waitangi tribunal judges burnt out - Chief Judge speaks out. *RNZ*. 25 October 2018. Accessed at: https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-ao-maori/369413/waitangi-tribunal-judges-burnt-out-chief-judge-speaks-out

[14] McGee, *Parliamentary Practice*, p.649.

[15] Knight, Dean R, Conceptualising an Integrity or Fourth Branch of Government in Aotearoa New Zealand: Promoting Probity in Governance and Safeguarding Constitutional Democracy (June 23, 2026), p.2. Accessed at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=7054199 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.7054199

threatens social cohesion, and damages our collective confidence in the public institutions that underpin our society.

Eroding Te Tiriti o Waitangi

New Zealand's watchdog agencies also play a vital role in holding public institutions to account for obligations arising from Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In addition to Te Rōpū Whakamana i Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the Waitangi Tribunal itself, the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (PCE) advises Parliament on the consistency of environmental policies with Treaty principles.[16] PCE has also played an important role in advising the Waitangi Tribunal on the extent to which the Crown's environmental management actions are consistent with its Te Tiriti obligations.[17] The Human Rights Commission explicitly recognises Te Tiriti as a foundational document of Aotearoa New Zealand and, through its mandate on Indigenous rights, considers Treaty obligations alongside human rights principles.[18]

Weakening these institutions therefore weakens the Crown's ability to meet its obligations under Te Tiriti. It reduces the capacity of the state to monitor, scrutinise, and improve its own performance of those obligations.

Eroding democracy

Senior officials have repeatedly warned about these risks. Their concerns have been public, consistent, and increasingly urgent. Yet those warnings have largely gone unheeded by the Government.

Earlier this year, Controller and Auditor-General Grant Taylor cautioned that while New Zealand has long benefited from strong public institutions, clear norms, and a culture of integrity, these strengths cannot be taken for granted. They can be steadily weakened if they are not actively maintained, replenished, and supported over time.[19]

Similarly, in a media release on 1 December last year, Privacy Commissioner Michael Webster warned that the Privacy Act 2020 is no longer fit for purpose and required further reform to meet contemporary challenges.[20] He noted that the current law failed to provide sufficient incentives for organisations to meet even basic privacy obligations. This helps to explain the record numbers of privacy complaints and data breach notifications now being received.

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[16] As set out in the title of the Environment Act 1986, (c)(iii).

[17] Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, *Environmental Management and the Principles of the Treaty of Waitangi: Report on Crown Response to the Recommendations of the Waitangi Tribunal 1983-1988*, November 1988. Accessed at: environmental-management-and-the-principles-of-the-treaty-of-waitangi-nov-1988-small.pdf

[18] Promoting better understanding of the human rights dimensions of the Treaty of Waitangi and their relationship with domestic and international human rights law is one of the core functions of the Commission. See: s5(2)(d) Human Rights Act 1993

[19] See the blog of the OAG: New Zealand's integrity inheritance — Office of the Auditor-General New Zealand

[20] Office of the Privacy Commissioner, *Media Release: Privacy Act 2020 turns 5 – changes are needed*,1 December 2025. Accessed at: Office of the Privacy Commissioner | Privacy Act 2020 turns 5 – changes are needed

Concerns about funding are not new. New Zealand's watchdog agencies have been raising them for decades. The need for adequate and genuinely independent funding, free from undue influence by the institutions being scrutinised, has been recognised since at least the 1990s.

Upon leaving office in 2003, Chief Ombudsman Sir Brian Elwood warned:

> An effective Ombudsmen's office requires adequate funding in order to fulfil its legislative mandate. ... an under-resourced office is unable to carry out [its] mandate effectively. It risks becoming part of a problem, namely an unsatisfactory interaction between a citizen and the agencies of Government, rather than a means by which that relationship can be improved and injustice avoided when disputes or misunderstandings arise. [21]

These warnings apply to all watchdog agencies and are even more relevant today.

Eroding our ability to navigate current and future challenges

The Coalition Government is allowing untested technology to transform public agencies with next to no safeguards. Public agencies are being encouraged to adopt artificial intelligence and increase use of automated decision making while operating within regulatory frameworks that were not designed for the challenges they face. Vast quantities of personal information are being collected, stored, shared, and analysed. At the same time, citizens are better informed, more connected, and more alert to failures of accountability than ever before.

This is not a challenge unique to New Zealand. Across the world, democratic societies are grappling with declining trust, growing concerns about transparency, and increasing pressure on institutions intended to safeguard rights and hold power to account.

Against that backdrop, starving New Zealand's watchdog agencies of the funding they need to do their jobs is not a neutral budgetary decision. It is a choice with real consequences. It signals that accountability, privacy, human rights, and independent oversight are lower priorities. It increases the risk that problems will go undetected, that rights will be inadequately protected, and that public institutions will face less effective scrutiny.

At a time when trust is under strain, and the challenges facing our democracy are becoming more complex, weakening the institutions designed to protect the public is a risk New Zealand cannot afford to take.

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[21] Fergusson, Lesley, Parliament's Watchdogs — New Zealand's Officers of Parliament, *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, Spring 2010, Vol. 25(2), pp.133–45. Accessed at: APR 25(2) Parliament's Watchdogs — New Zealand's Officers of Parliament, p142.

The evidence

Spotlight on the Office of the Privacy Commissioner

New Zealanders are facing increasing risks to their privacy. With the digitisation of services, the risks associated with data management and governance grow, and the public expects more protection, not less. While technology is changing rapidly, our privacy and other information regulation, has not kept pace. The Government has been clear that it will not update the Privacy Act or other regulation to create stronger guardrails around emerging and increased risks, including the aggressive adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) across agencies they have directed. This leaves our rights and interests unprotected.

The Office of the Privacy Commissioner (OPC) has been under sustained demand pressure while facing funding cuts in real terms. At this time of rapid technological change, it has fewer resources to do the increasingly complex work of safeguarding our personal information and data rights. Information from the Office's annual reports and Budget documents, shows:

- Between 2023 and 2026 the number of privacy complaints the Office received increased by 84% and the number of privacy breach notifications it received increased by 30%.
- Between Budget 2023 and Budget 2026, the Office has seen a real decrease in funding of 15.3%.

In response to an OIA request, the Office told us that the number of notifications in 2025/26 is significantly higher than previous years because it includes all notifications made by the large number of agencies affected by the Manage My Health and Medimap incidents.[22] For context, the Office reports that of the 2232 notifications it received last year from agencies, 1710 had been assessed as serious harm breaches.

The OPC is mainly funded by the Ministry of Justice. In 2024 $2.124 million over four years was cut from the Office's operational funding in order to meet the Government's demand for austerity.[23] When considering this cut, Government Ministers were briefed that "The savings from this initiative may risk the OPC's ability to respond to major privacy breaches and undertake litigation or prosecution of key privacy issues."[24] The pressure is relentless, with the current Government planning further cuts to the Ministry's baseline in coming years.[25]

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[22] OIA request by PSA to the Office of the Privacy Commissioner, response 1 September 2026.

[23] The Treasury, *Budget 2024 Information Release: Bilateral Briefing: Budget 2024 Justice Sector Multilateral Briefing*, 19 March 2024. p.13. Accessed at: https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2024-09/b24-bilat-just-4933109.pdf

[24] The Treasury, *Budget 2024 Information Release*: *Bilateral Briefing: Budget 2024 Justice Sector Multilateral Briefing*, 19 March 2024. P13. Accessed at: https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2024-09/b24-bilat-just-4933109.pdf

[25] The Treasury, *Budget 2024 Information Release*: *4 November 2025 letter from Hon Nicola Willis, Minister of Finance, to Hon Paul Goldsmith, Minister of Justice*. Accessed at: B26 Invitation Letter - Law and Order Envelope - 4 November 2025 - Budget 2026 Information Release

The Government has also chosen to ignore identified regulatory gaps around evolving technologies like AI. This is leaving our rights and interests unprotected while overloading the Office.

The broader picture is even more concerning. Our privacy watchdog is not being underfunded in isolation. This report shows a similar picture for funding at the Human Rights Commission and Health and Disability Commissioner, both of which are important for supporting our rights around our personal information.

What's at stake

The Privacy Commissioner is an Independent Officer established under the Privacy Act 2020 to promote and protect individual privacy rights. The Commissioner's principal functions include providing guidance on privacy law, monitoring compliance with the Privacy Act, investigating alleged privacy breaches, and encouraging agencies to adopt good privacy practices in the collection, use, storage, and disclosure of personal information.

The Commissioner has oversight of both public and private sector organisations that handle personal information. Individuals may complain to the Commissioner if they believe their privacy has been interfered with, and the Commissioner can investigate complaints, facilitate dispute resolution, issue compliance notices, and refer unresolved matters to the Human Rights Review Tribunal. The office also plays an important role in advising government on privacy implications of legislation and policy, ensuring that evolving technologies and information-sharing practices appropriately balance innovation, public interests, and individual rights.

By the numbers

Change in work demand since 2023	
Total privacy complaints received	+84%
Total privacy breach notifications	+30%
Funding change in real terms since 2023	
Dollar amount	-$1,380,000
Percentage	-15.3%

Spotlight on the Human Rights Commission

The Human Rights Commission (HRC) is facing increased demand and complexity in its work. At the same time, the Government's funding cuts are eroding the Commission's ability to deliver on its statutory role. This risks damage to New Zealand's international reputation and our ability to participate in international human rights forums. Information from annual reports, Budget documents, select committee documents and information released to the PSA under the Official Information Act shows:

- Between its 2023 and 2025 Annual Reports, the Commission has seen a 49% increase in total enquiries and complaints responded to and a 41% increase in the number of enquiries and complaints completed or closed.[26]
- Between Budget 2023 and Budget 2026, the Commission has seen a real decrease in funding of 18.5%.

The Commission is funded through the Ministry of Justice. On 4 November last year, the Minister of Finance wrote to the Minister of Justice to notify him that the Ministry's baseline funding would be cut in the coming budget and in each year following.[27] This has the potential to curtail the Commission's ability to protect our rights.

In response to questions at its 2024/25 Annual Review, the Commission noted that:

> Domestically, we are navigating increasing expectations from communities who are facing harsher inequalities, rapid social change, and new forms of vulnerability. The scale and complexity of human rights issues emerging in digital spaces, in climate adaptation, in demographic shifts, and in changes to work and the economy will only intensify.[28]

Responding to the Justice Select Committee, the Commission said "The staffing reductions implemented in 2024/25 and the preceding year have significantly increased delivery risk. Current staffing levels provide little resilience to absorb unexpected workforce gaps or respond to surges in dispute resolution demand."[29]

It reported to the Committee that "as investment in public institutions contracts, our ability to deliver on our statutory role is tested, and the stability of the international human rights ecosystem is eroded." It said that resource constraints carry "direct implications" for New Zealand's Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) accreditation, which assesses compliance with internationally recognised human rights standards – the Paris Principles. This is because "the independence and effectiveness required of an 'A status'

[26] 2023, 2024, 2025 performance years.

[27] Letter from Hon Nicola Willis, Minister of Finance, to Hon Paul Goldsmith, Minister of Justice. 4 November 2025, Accessed at: B26 Invitation Letter - Law and Order Envelope - 4 November 2025 - Budget 2026 Information Release

[28] Human Rights Commission. *2024/25 Annual Review: Human Rights Commission Responses to the Justice Committee*. 13 March 2026. p.11. Accessed at: 116739683bede5479ebb1e26b4b606073c24d967

[29] Ibid.

institution rest fundamentally on adequate resourcing."[30] An accreditation downgrade would mean New Zealand would no longer be able to vote and hold governance positions in some United Nations bodies.

What's at stake

The HRC is an independent Crown entity that promotes and protects human rights in New Zealand. Its role is grounded in the Human Rights Act 1993 and includes advocating for equality, freedom from discrimination, the protection of fundamental rights recognised in domestic and international law, and to promote by research, education, and discussion a better understanding of the human rights dimensions of the Treaty of Waitangi and their relationship with domestic and international human rights law.[31] The Commission aims to foster a society in which all people can participate fully and be treated with dignity and respect.

The Commission provides education, guidance, research, and advocacy on a broad range of human rights issues, including discrimination, accessibility, racial equality, children's rights, and the rights of Indigenous peoples and other communities. It also receives complaints relating to unlawful discrimination and human rights issues, and works to resolve disputes through information, mediation, and conciliation. In addition to addressing individual concerns, the Commission monitors systemic issues and promotes public discussion and policy development to strengthen human rights protections across New Zealand.

By the numbers

Change in work demand since 2023	
Total enquiries and complaints responded to	+49%
Total enquiries and complaints completed or closed	+41%
Funding change in real terms since 2023	
Dollar amount	-$2,821,000
Percentage	-18.5%

[30] Ibid. p.10
[31] S5(2)(d) Human Rights Act 1993. Accessed at: Human Rights Act 1993 | New Zealand Legislation

Spotlight on the Independent Police Conduct Authority

The Independent Police Conduct Authority (IPCA) is under sustained workload and funding pressure. Information from annual reports, Budget documents, select committee documents and released to us by the Authority shows:

- Since 2023, total complaints received have increased by 15%,[32] following on from a 61% increase in the preceding 4 years;[33] and an increase of 7% in investigations overseen and a 52% increase in investigations concluded.
- Between Budget 2023 and Budget 2026, the Authority has seen a real decrease in funding of 9.4%.

The Authority has been underfunded for an extended period, and this has left important aspects of police conduct unexamined. At its 2024/25 annual review, the Authority reported to the Justice Select Committee that it was "a matter of disappointment" that it did not have the resources to do a thematic review of the Police's policy of pulling back from mental health call-outs.[34] Earlier this year, the PSA wrote to the Authority with a complaint about lack of Police attendance at a particular incident involving a mental health patient. It responded that "the Authority will not be conducting a review of the Police mental health response change programme as we do not have the resources to do this."[35]

A 2021 review by Martin Jenkins recommended changes to improve effectiveness and a funding uplift,[36] however a 2023 evaluation found the recommended uplift had not been fully delivered and that the Authority had "been constrained in its ability to fully implement the recommendations" made by the review.[37]

What's at stake

The IPCA is an independent oversight body responsible for maintaining public confidence in policing by investigating complaints and incidents involving New Zealand Police. The Authority operates independently of both the Police and the Government when carrying out its investigative functions. Its purpose is to provide assurance that allegations of police misconduct or neglect of duty are assessed fairly, impartially, and transparently.

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[32] IPCA 2026 performance information provided to PSA by email in response to our enquiry, 31 August 2026.

[33] Justice Select Committee. 2023 annual review, IPCA response to questions, p.7. Accessed at: 2023 annual review, IPCA response to questions

[34] Justice Select Committee. Review briefing on the 2024/25 annual review of the Independent Police Conduct Authority. p.4 Accessed at: https://selectcommittees.parliament.nz/v/6/53f2f8f8-1134-4aa3-181b-08deb7843b48?lang=en

[35] IPCA. Letter from IPCA to PSA, 28 January 2026, further quoted in IPCA letter to PSA 19 August 2026. ref IPCA: 25-31108

[36] Justice Select Committee, 2023 annual review, IPCA response to questions. p.7. Accessed at: 2023 annual review, IPCA response to questions

[37] Ibid, p.7

The IPCA investigates complaints from members of the public about police conduct and undertakes independent investigations into serious incidents involving police, including deaths or serious bodily harm related to Police actions. Following its investigations, the Authority may make findings and recommendations aimed at improving policing practices, accountability, and public trust. Although the IPCA cannot itself prosecute or discipline police officers, its findings and recommendations carry significant weight and contribute to strengthening professional standards, ensuring police powers are exercised lawfully and appropriately.

By the numbers

Change in work demand since 2023	
Total complaints received	+15%
Investigations overseen	+7%
Investigations concluded	+52%
Funding change in real terms since 2023	
Dollar amount	-$701,000
Percentage	-9.4%

Spotlight on Te Rōpū Whakamana i Te Tiriti o Waitangi The Waitangi Tribunal

The Waitangi Tribunal faces high and sustained demand for its work and inadequate funding reduces its ability to scrutinise Crown actions and facilitate access to justice for Māori. The Tribunal has been under pressure from high numbers of applications for urgent inquiries, 45 between 2023 and 2025, and this has slowed progress on other areas of the Tribunal's work.[38] It has called out clear and ongoing underfunding for claimants. Information from annual reports, Tribunal and Budget documents shows:

- Clear evidence of ongoing underfunding of the support necessary for claims.
- Between Budget 2023 and Budget 2026, the Tribunal has seen a real decrease in funding of 11.5%.[39]

The Tribunal has said that "when the Crown fails to resource Māori properly to participate in its inquiries, the purpose of the Tribunal is seriously undermined."[40] Claimants have cautioned that "inadequate funding arrangements caused hardship and distress and discouraged participation".[41]

A March 2025 strategic review found the Tribunal "experiences significant issues in resourcing its hearing programme", and that "(g)iven the volume and complexity of the Tribunal's projected workload over the next decade, the matter of resourcing will need to be addressed." [42] It recommended "seeking an increase in resourcing provided to the Waitangi Tribunal so as to better enable the Tribunal to complete its work expeditiously."[43]

What's at stake

Set up by the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975, the Waitangi Tribunal is a permanent commission of inquiry. It acts as an independent check on government policy and legislation for compliance with the principles of the Treaty, ensuring transparency regarding how decisions impact Māori.

It provides an official legal process to examine historical and contemporary claims dating back to 1840, uncovering facts and evidence about past and current Crown actions. Its findings and recommendations help resolve outstanding issues and build a shared understanding between Māori and the Crown. While its recommendations are not legally binding, they often serve as the

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[38] The Waitangi Tribunal Strategic Direction Review Group. *Review of the Waitangi Tribunal's strategic direction: report to the Chairperson.* March 2025. p.12. Accessed at: Review-of-the-Waitangi-Tribunals-strategic-direction-Report-to-the-Chairperson.pdf

[39] The Waitangi Tribunal is funded out of Vote Courts, administered by the Ministry of Justice.

[40] Waitangi Tribunal. Report on Claimant Funding. 17 February 2023. Released as part of *Report on Whakatika ki Runga, a Mini-Inquiry Commencing Te Rau o te Tika: The Justice System Inquiry*. Accessed at: Report on Claimant Funding

[41] Ibid.

[42] The Waitangi Tribunal Strategic Direction Review Group. *Review of the Waitangi Tribunal's Strategic Direction: Report to the Chairperson*. March 2025. p.2. Accessed at: Review-of-the-Waitangi-Tribunals-strategic-direction-Report-to-the-Chairperson.pdf

[43] Ibid.

factual and moral basis for direct negotiations and major historical settlements between iwi and the government.

By the numbers[44]

Funding change in real terms since 2023	
Dollar amount	-$1,780,000
Percentage	-11.5%

[44] Year on year work demand not detailed here as the Waitangi Tribunal is established as a standing commission of inquiry under the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975, with a focus on reporting inquiry outcomes. The other watchdogs reported on are either independent Crown entities or officers of Parliament.

Spotlight on the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment

Unlike the other agencies in this report, funding for the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (PCE) has kept up with inflation. Its funding arrangements are different from the other agencies highlighted in this report. The funding for the PCE is reviewed by the Officers of Parliament Committee, a cross-party parliamentary committee chaired by the Speaker, rather than being reviewed by a Cabinet Minister. However, the PCE is still experiencing constrained capacity in its function of advising Parliament. The Commissioner is currently under increased pressure as the "the Government is proposing a lot of change to the environmental management system" and these changes require submissions by the Commissioner.[45] Information from annual reports, Budget documents and select committee documents shows:

- An increase since 2023 of 125% in reports, commentaries and submissions published, and a 19% increase in briefings given to members of Parliament.
- Between Budget 2023 and Budget 2026, the PCE has seen real increase in funding of 2%.

The Commissioner commented to the Environment Select Committee earlier this year that more funding would mean his office could undertake more investigations and make more recommendations to Parliament, although he is also concerned that his recommendations are not implemented by the Government.[46]

Last year in its Final Report on the Estimate for Vote Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, the Environment Select Committee noted:

> "During our consideration of the Fast-track Approvals Bill, the PCE provided independent advice. The commissioner said that this is 'absolutely' something that his office is willing to do. However, he again noted the limited capacity of his staff and said that independent advice should only be sought 'if it is really worth it'."[47]

What's at stake

The PCE's core purpose is to help maintain and improve the quality of New Zealand's environment by undertaking evidence-based investigations and reporting findings directly to Parliament.

The PCE is an independent Officer of the New Zealand Parliament established under the Environment Act 1986. The Commissioner operates independently of both Ministers and

[45] Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2024/25 Annual report. p.22. Accessed at: PCE Annual Report 2024/25

[46] Environment Select Committee. *Final Report Estimates of Appropriations for Vote Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment*. 2026. p4. Accessed at: Final Report Estimates of Appropriations for Vote Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment

[47] Environment Select Committee. *Review briefing on the 2023/24 annual review of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment*. 2025. p4. Accessed at: Review briefing on the 2023/24 annual review of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment

government agencies, providing Parliament with impartial analysis and advice on environmental issues and the effectiveness of New Zealand's environmental management system.

The Commissioner's functions include reviewing the agencies, policies and processes used to manage New Zealand's natural resources, investigating environmental issues and the performance of public authorities, conducting inquiries into matters that may have significant environmental impacts, and reporting on environmental aspects of proposed legislation, petitions or matters referred by Parliament. The Commissioner also promotes the collection and dissemination of environmental information and makes recommendations for improving environmental outcomes.

Change in work demand since 2023	
Reports, commentaries and submissions published	+125%
Briefings given to members of Parliament	+19%
Funding change in real terms since 2023	
Dollar amount	+$99,000
Percentage	+2%

Spotlight on the Health and Disability Commissioner

Work demands on the Health and Disability Commissioner (HDC) have grown in number and complexity, but the Government has chosen to cut its funding. Information from annual reports, Budget documents and select committee documents shows:

- Between 2023 and 2025, enquiries increased by 9% and have become more complex, despite being flat between 2023 and 2025 (-1%). Complaints are 48% above pre-pandemic levels,[48] and the Commission has increased the number of complaints closed by 17%.
- Between 2023 and 2025, the HDC has seen a real decrease in funding of 15.9%.[49]

In its 2025 annual report the Commissioner notes that complaints are at historically high levels – 48% above pre-pandemic levels – and that this "reflects growing consumer concern about timely access to care, the adequacy of treatment, and the impacts of a stretched workforce".[50]

This huge increase in workload was partially addressed by temporary funding over the pandemic; however, this has since been removed.

In August of this year, in its briefing to the Health Select Committee for the Commissioner's 2025 annual review, the Auditor General reported to the Health Select Committee that at the time of the hearing, complaint volumes were about 12 percent higher than the previous year and that it is under pressure from a 45 percent increase in complaints over the previous five years.[51] The select committee further noted that "(t)he HDC said the increasing complexity of healthcare, including multidisciplinary models of care, had contributed to a rise in the complexity of complaints. It also noted that new models of care, such as telehealth, were creating emerging issues."[52]

What's at stake

The HDC is an independent Crown entity responsible for promoting and protecting the rights of people using health and disability services in New Zealand. Its primary role is to uphold the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights, which sets out the rights that all consumers are entitled to when receiving health or disability services, including the rights to respect, informed consent, effective communication, and appropriate standards of care.

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[48] Health and Disability Commissioner. *2024/25 Annual Report*. p.2. Accessed at: Corporate Publications — Health & Disability Commissioner

[49] As noted above, a different period of analysis has been used for the Health and Disability Commissioner due to Budget reporting conventions.

[50] Health and Disability Commissioner. *2024/25 Annual Report*. p.2.

[51] Most of this increase occurred before the period analysed in this report and therefore does not appear in our dataset.

[52] New Zealand House of Representatives Health Select Committee, *Review briefing on the 2024/25 annual review of the Health and Disability Commissioner*, August 2026, p.4. Accessed at: Review briefing on the 2024/25 annual review of the Health and Disability Commissioner

The Commission receives and assesses complaints about health and disability service providers, including public hospitals, private practitioners, aged care facilities, and disability support services. The HDC seeks to resolve concerns through a range of mechanisms, including advocacy, mediation, recommendations for service improvements, formal investigations, and where serious breaches are identified, referrals to the Director of Proceedings. Through its complaint handling, education, monitoring, and systemic review functions, the HDC contributes to improving the quality and safety of health and disability services across New Zealand.

By the numbers

Change in work demand since 2023	
Number of enquiries received	+9%
Number of complaints received	-1%
Number of complaints closed	+17%
Funding change in real terms since 2023 (Q2 2023 – Q2 2025)	
Dollar amount	-$2,972,000
Percentage	-15.9%

Appendix 1

Appropriations for watchdog organisations, Budget 2023 - 2026

($000)	2023/24 appropriation[53]	Inflation adjusted equivalent 2026	26/27 Budgeted appropriation	Difference	Change in real terms
Services from the Privacy Commissioner (Vote Justice)	$ 8,171	$ 9,021	$ 7,641	-$ 1,380	-15.3%
Services from the Human Rights Commission (Vote Justice)	$ 13,829	$ 15,267	$ 12,446	-$ 2,821	-18.5%
Services from the Independent Police Conduct Authority (Vote Justice)	$ 6,742	$ 7,443	$ 6,742	-$ 701	-9.4%
Waitangi Tribunal Services (Vote Courts)	$ 14,039	$ 15,499	$ 13,719	-$ 1,780	-11.5%
Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment	$ 4,416	$ 4,875	$ 4,974	$ 99	2.0%
Health and Disability Commissioner (Vote Health)	*$ 17,597*[54]	$ 18,669	*$ 15,697*[55]	-$ 2,972	-15.9%

[53] Apart from the Health and Disability Commissioner (HDC), 2023/24 & 2026/27 appropriations are taken from corresponding Estimates of Appropriations.

[54] For HDC, estimated actuals for the previous year, recorded in Vote Health, are used here in place of Budget appropriations because funding for the HDC is not decided in the Budget for the coming year - the split between entities funded by the Monitoring and Protecting Health and Disability Consumer Interests line is settled afterwards by the Ministry of Health. The figure used here is estimated actual spend for the 2023/24 is taken from Vote Health Estimates of Appropriations 2024/25.

[55] 2025/26 estimated actuals are used here, recorded in Vote Health 2026/27. The equivalent inflation measure has also been used.

Appendix 2

Demand data from annual reports – 2023 to 2025

	Factor description	2023	2025	% change
Services from the Privacy Commissioner (Vote Justice)	Total privacy complaints received	870	1598	84%
	Total privacy breach notifications	838	1093	30%
Services from the Human Rights Commission (Vote Justice)	Total enquiries and complaints received and responded to	5619	8376	49%
	Total enquiries and complaints completed or closed	5730	8087	41%
Services from the Independent Police Conduct Authority (Vote Justice)	Total complaints received	4449	5115	15%
	Investigations overseen	184	196	7%
	Investigations concluded	44	67	52%
Waitangi Tribunal Services (Vote Courts)	A 2025 review found that, 'as currently configured', the Tribunal 'experiences significant issues in resourcing its hearing programme.' [56]			
Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment	Reports, commentaries and submissions published	20	45	125%
	Briefings given to members of Parliament	31	37	19%
Health and Disability Commissioner (Vote Health)	Number of enquiries received	24506	26763	9%
	Number of complaints received	6210	6124	-1%
	Number of complaints closed	6028	7055	17%

[56] The Waitangi Tribunal Strategic Direction Review Group. *Review of the Waitangi Tribunal's strategic direction: report to the Chairperson*. March 2025. p.2. Accessed at: https://www.waitangitribunal.govt.nz/assets/Strategic-Direction/Review-of-the-Waitangi-Tribunals-strategic-direction-Report-to-the-Chairperson.pdf Year on year work demand data is not reported by the Waitangi Tribunal detailed as with the other agencies.