

27 May 2026

Grace R

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Tēnā koe Grace

Your request for official information, reference: HNZ00203193

Thank you for your email on 29 April 2026, asking Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora for information under the Official Information Act 1982 (the OIA). Your request is attached as **Appendix One**.

Response

Health New Zealand recognises that uniform requirements within forensic mental health inpatient environments may vary across New Zealand and in some forensic settings, staff may wear standardised uniforms, while in others a non-uniform or “civvies” approach is adopted.

For the sake of clarity, each question is responded to in turn below.

If national consistency is a key rationale, please clarify why Waikato forensic mental health staff are from 2024 were longer permitted to wear civvies, while other regions continue to retain this option, and how this aligns with the statement that uniform decisions are made locally.

Waikato made an informed decision to transition from civilian clothing to uniforms at a time when national consistency was not a determining factor. This decision was made by the Mental Health and Addictions Leadership team following careful consideration of all available information and the potential impacts on taangata whaiora, whaanau, and staff.

Further, during the 2024 Waikato region mental health compulsory inpatient uniform rollout, community-based staff were permitted to continue wearing civvies (with the option of wearing uniforms), while inpatient forensic wards were made compulsory - only with further consultation secondary from push back from unions. Staff who frequent public areas with patients were required to wear compulsory unbranded uniforms - however there's are still very identifiable in large groups. Please confirm whether this reflects current policy and uniform rollout rationals, having differentiation between service types within the same region.

The uniform rollout focused primarily on inpatient units. This emphasis reflected concerns raised by whaanau and taangata whaiora about staff not being easily identifiable within our 24/7 facilities, and the need to strengthen infection prevention measures in the inpatient clinical environment. The introduction of uniforms aims to improve visibility and clarity of roles for those in our care, while supporting safer practice across inpatient settings.

Cost: Whether cost efficiency considerations include any analysis comparing full uniform provision versus maintaining civvies as an option. As allowing civvies, or reintroducing civvies during the may uniform roll out in the Waikato area as an option would likely reduce uniform-related costs.

Consideration was given to the costs of uniforms versus the clothing/laundry allowance. However, cost was not the only factor taken into account when the final decision was made. Uniforms are also considered to strengthen professional identity and improve tangata whaiora experience.

** Consistency: Whether there is a defined national or local dress code policy for civvies, and whether this is considered an alternative mechanism for achieving consistency. A clear dress code for civvies could achieve consistency without removing flexibility. (Some NGOs that have civvies have policies standing what colours staff can wear, if role identification is a concern, or more identifiable ID cards seen overseas - large font RN; EN; MHA)*

There is currently no national policy regarding the consistent use of uniforms or civvies. Waikato will align with any future national decision for inpatient, community, and forensic mental health services if and when such a decision is made.

** Staff feedback: What formal processes exist for staff to raise concerns regarding uniform design and implementation, including feedback on current issues such as material, visibility, and comfort. Multiple Waikato staff have raised concerns about the new uniforms, particularly the unbranded bright synthetic polos, with limited evidence of these concerns being meaningfully addressed. Please advise what formal pathways exist for escalation.*

There is an established escalation process for staff to raise concerns that have not been resolved at the time they are initially raised. Formal pathways include:

- Raising concerns directly with their line manager, including suggested options or improvements
- Escalation by the line manager to their own manager if required
- Engaging with health and safety representatives
- Lodging an incident through Datix
- Seeking support from their union if concerns remain unresolved

** Patient experience: How the use of uniforms versus civvies in mental health inpatient and community settings has been assessed in relation to therapeutic engagement, power dynamics, and patient privacy. Non-uniform approaches are widely recognised in mental health settings as supporting therapeutic relationships and reducing power imbalance. In community settings, uniformed groups may also inadvertently identify individuals as patients, impacting privacy and dignity.*

There is no formal assessment framework in place for evaluating therapeutic engagement, power dynamics, or patient privacy in relation to uniform use, beyond discussions with tangata whaiora and whānau.

To date, no concerns or issues have been raised regarding the wearing of uniforms.

Uniforms are considered to:

- Provide clear professional identification of staff
- Support infection prevention
- Provide clarity for tangata whaiora and whānau

Please also clarify:

** Whether Waikato's policy regarding compulsory forensic mental health uniforms will be reviewed to align with the stated objectives of the may uniform role out : ease of supply, cost-effectiveness, staff comfort, patient experience, and national consistency*

Waikato Mental Health & Addiction Service will review the requirement for Forensic Mental Health

Rehabilitation staff to wear a specific uniform once a national decision is made regarding uniforms for mental health and addiction staff, including forensic services, in both community and inpatient settings.

** Whether there are any plans to introduce a nationally consistent approach that includes the option of civvies in mental health settings where clinically appropriate*

Health New Zealand is in the early stages of reviewing uniform and professional standards policies across the organisation, in partnership with unions. The intention of this work is to develop a more consistent approach nationally.

At present, there is no single national or regional policy governing the use of uniforms or civvies, and practices may vary across districts. As part of the upcoming review, considerations around where uniforms are required, optional, or not used, including the potential role of civvies in mental health settings, will be carefully considered.

At this stage, no decisions have been made regarding the inclusion of civvies as part of a nationally consistent approach.

How to get in touch

If you have any questions, you can contact us at h.nzOIA@tewhaturora.govt.nz.

If you are not happy with this response, you have the right to make a complaint to the Ombudsman. Information about how to do this is available at www.ombudsman.parliament.nz or by phoning 0800 802 602.

As this information may be of interest to other members of the public, Health NZ may proactively release a copy of this response on our website. All requester data, including your name and contact details, will be removed prior to release.

Nāku iti noa, nā



Matthew McLay

Manager Government Services

Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora

Appendix One

Request received 29 April 2026

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Additional clarification is requested in relation to the following:

** Cost: Whether cost efficiency considerations include any analysis comparing full uniform provision versus maintaining civvies as an option. As allowing civvies, or reintroducing civvies during the may uniform roll out in the Waikato area as an option would likely reduce uniform-related costs.*

** Consistency: Whether there is a defined national or local dress code policy for civvies, and whether this is considered an alternative mechanism for achieving consistency. A clear dress code for civvies could achieve consistency without removing flexibility. (Some NGOs that have civvies have policies standing what colours staff can wear, if role identification is a concern, or more identifiable ID cards seen overseas - large font RN; EN; MHA)*

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