

Appendix 2 – Impacts of COVID-19 on Older New Zealanders

For the most part, older New Zealanders have come through the pandemic period well

1. Underutilisation rates for older workers (aged 50+) are typically lower than for the adult population as a whole. Economic disruption as a result of COVID-19 has not resulted in a statistically significant increase, and the rate for this group stood at 8.4% for the March 2021 quarter. Small sample sizes make comparison challenging, but existing trends of higher underutilisation rates for older women, Māori and Pacific people appear to have persisted.
2. Statistical indications of wider wellbeing for older people (aged 65+), such as income adequacy and experiences of loneliness and discrimination, have not deteriorated significantly over the course of the pandemic. As was the case before COVID-19, results for those aged 65+ have tended to be slightly better than for other age groups.
3. Poorer outcomes across these indicators for older Māori, Pacific and Asian people, and women, are in line with trends in the total adult population. These discrepancies have not widened significantly through the pandemic period.
4. Contacts to the National Elder Abuse Response Service phone line (437 calls in the March 2021 quarter) have not noticeably increased through the pandemic period. However, some stakeholders working with older people have reported increases in elder abuse during lockdown periods.
5. Stakeholders working with older people that the Office has been in contact with through the pandemic period noted the resilience of people and communities. They have indicated this year that a degree of “normality” has returned and have expressed optimism about the processes and relationships they now have in place to support their organisations and the older people they work with, should a resurgence require a return to higher alert levels.

Negative Impacts have been felt by some

6. Some employment impacts have been evident. Almost 14,000 more older workers (aged 50+) were receiving Jobseeker benefits in March 2021 as compared to February 2020 (immediately before lockdown). Evidence following the 2009 financial crisis suggests these individuals are more likely to spend longer out of work, as compared to other age groups, and are likely to suffer a greater reduction in income once they return to employment.
7. Reports have been received about some older people experiencing a fear of resuming activities and re-engaging in public life among a significant minority of older people, particularly those who had not yet been vaccinated at the time of contact.
8. Concerns were expressed by some stakeholders about delays in the resumption of services following the lockdown periods or cutting of services entirely. They expressed concern about the risk of “social atrophy” for affected older people, resulting in an exacerbation of existing social isolation and physical health challenges.
9. The perception that some of the public health response rules were discriminatory towards older people was reported by some stakeholders. Examples given included

higher alert level restrictions being imposed on those living in rest homes, including independent villas in retirement villages.

Pre-pandemic struggles were exacerbated

10. The consensus among stakeholders was that older people who were doing well before the pandemic generally continued to do well, and those struggling or close to struggling before the pandemic continued to struggle. Factors that influenced this included whether older individuals were already connected with support services, what type of support services they were using, where they lived and who they lived with, their age group and health.
11. Stakeholders expressed concern about the ongoing digital exclusion of some older people. While for some the pandemic has been a push to get digitally connected, for many others who are not digitally connected this increasingly impacted on their ability to meaningfully participate in society. Estimates based on internet connection rates and survey data suggest the number of digitally excluded older people to be in the hundreds of thousands.
12. Housing continues to present a challenge for some older people. In line with pre-pandemic trends, the number of applicants aged 65+ on the public housing register has continued to grow steadily, totalling 2,064 in March 2021. Older people are proportionally under-represented on the register but continue to grow as a proportion of applicants from this low base. The number of older people receiving the Accommodation Supplement has also steadily increased and totalled 127,522 in March 2021; an increase of approximately 12,000 as compared to March 2020.
13. A longer-term trend of falling home ownership among older people means that the number facing challenges meeting their housing costs is likely to continue to increase.