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BRC hearings at COVID-19 Alert level one

Now that we have moved to Alert Level One, there are no physical distancing requirements and no restrictions on personal movement, although personal space should as always, be respected.

Under Alert Level One, Benefit Review Committee Hearings have started again. This means that clients who wish to have face to face Hearings with the Review Committee should be accommodated as far as possible. However, other options for attendance at a BRC Hearing like tele-conferencing or video-conferencing (where facilities exist) should also be offered to clients who wish to do so.

Achievements over lockdown

The Ministry was very busy over lockdown with our response to the COVID-19 pandemic and this continues. Here are some of the achievements over the last few months:

- We never closed. We may have shut our doors on Monday, 23 March, but we kept working
- Wage subsidy and leave payment schemes were agreed to on 16 March – and we were taking calls the next day. We've had:
 - 781,994 Wage Subsidy and Leave Scheme applications
 - \$13.0 billion paid to support 1,722,587 jobs
 - We set up the audit and assurance process to support the integrity of the wage subsidy
- We introduced the Wage Subsidy extension and COVID-19 Income Relief Payments
- We introduced the Recovery Package on 17 March to boost household incomes – main benefits went up \$25 a week, the Winter Energy Payment doubled for this year, and we removed the hours test from the in-work tax credit
- Each introduction of a new payment scheme required significant amounts of work from policy, legal, IT, operational policy, communications, service delivery and frontline staff to put it in place
- We adjusted our operating model for responding to each alert level and our property and facilities, health, safety and security teams supported our sites to meet the Ministry of Health standards at each alert level
- We responded to the massive increase in calls – 27,500 a day at Alert Level Four - and worked hard to bring down wait times
- We answered calls to the Government Helpline and between 15–26 March we took Healthline calls to ease pressure on the Ministry of Health
- We had people on the ground at the National Crisis Management Centre, including from the Office for Seniors to provide advice about supporting older and vulnerable people
- We met the huge increase in demand for benefits and other support
- We made things easier for clients:
 - Access to services and ability to apply for grants over the phone or online

- Streamlined application form – auto-populated and online (We could complete the form if the client couldn't)
- Temporarily relaxed rules around stand-down, obligation failures, disability allowance and annual reviews, the need for medical certificates
- Made it possible to apply for food grants online and increased the amount
- Changed our appointment booking system
- Māori, Communities and Partnerships distributed \$27 million to support NGOs and community groups to get much-needed funds to areas like family and sexual violence services, the disabled community, building financial capability, and into hard to reach communities
- We reached out to clients, partners and employers, students and seniors using email, text messages, and online to keep them up to date
- Social media came into its own with Facebook becoming a much-used channel for people to private message us for support and for us to let people know of any changes
- Our media team responded to the marked increase in interest and scrutiny from the public and media
- We translated our material and made it easy to access, going out on the radio and social media to talk to people in their own language
- We supported Civil Defence and Emergency Management to co-ordinate essential needs and food for families, individuals and foodbanks, as well as to make 135,000 calls to some of New Zealand's most vulnerable people to check they're okay
- Our IT teams made it possible for 5,500 of us to work from home, including frontline staff able to provide full case management, call centre and processing services remotely
- Over 2,000 laptops and desktops were reconfigured and sent to staff across the country
- Our network access went from 1,000-8,000 people
- We built a new 'ready to work' button online for people to go straight through to our Job Connect team
- MyMSD was enhanced to allow more people to use it at a time and with new features - intent to apply, clients can register without a SWN, uploading documents, reminder to clients to complete next steps
- We paused - then resumed - childcare assistance and contracted OSCAR providers to deliver in-home childcare to essential workers
- We boosted our employment services:
 - Rapid Response Teams set up in 11 regions
 - Rapid Return to Work phone service set up on 28 April to help with job searches and work readiness. The teams had contacted 2,225 people by the end of May, with 334 getting a job
 - Online Recruitment Tool launched 24 April to keep New Zealand working. By the start of June there were over 2,000 jobs listed
 - We expanded our employment service for disabled workers
 - We adapted to online job expos
 - A new Apprenticeship support package with funding to help employers keep apprentices and an extension to Mana in Mahi
 - We still managed to get people into work during lockdown:
 - o 6,648 in March 2020
 - o 3,065 in April 2020
 - o 6,080 in May 2020
- Recruitment drive for new frontline staff to assist increased demand
- Built demand forecast system to predict where frontline teams were most needed
- Produced a multitude of reports and dashboards – and updated these weekly

Current Support available due to COVID-19

Most weekly benefits have a stand-down. This is a period of time where you can't get any money from us. It's usually 1 or 2 weeks after your application is approved. The Government has removed stand-downs as part of its response to COVID-19. If you're eligible for a benefit between 23 March 2020 and 23 November 2020, you won't have a stand-down.

The **Covid-19 Wage Subsidy Extension payment** is available to support employers, including self-employed people, who are still significantly impacted by COVID-19. Applications are open from 10 June 2020 to 1 September 2020.

Please note, decisions to decline the COVID-19 Wage Subsidy and the Wage Subsidy Extension payment are not made under the Social Security Act 2018 and are not covered by

the usual Review of Decision process. If an employer wishes to review the decision to decline the wage subsidy, that decision is to be reconsidered.

The **COVID-19 Income Relief Payment** is for people who lose their job (including self-employment) from 1 March 2020 to 30 October 2020 due to COVID-19. Payments continue for up to 12 weeks.

The COVID-19 Income Relief Payment is made under the Social Security Act 2018 and so the usual Review of Decision process applies. We received 12 RoDs in June so you may see some of these decisions at BRCs soon.

There are changes to the existing **Rent Arrears Assistance** Housing Support Product in light of the economic impact COVID-19 is having on households in rented accommodation.

The amount people can receive is increasing from \$2000 to \$4000 and these temporary changes start on 6 July and go through to 31 December 2020. They mean we can help more people to keep their homes if they get behind on their rent and their tenancy is at risk, while they try to find new sources of income, employment or a more affordable rental.

Further information and other support can be found on the following link:

<https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/>

Redundancy payments and benefits

You may have seen in the media questioning how the Ministry treats redundancy payments for the commencement of benefits. People can check how their redundancy pay was treated for previous benefit applications and also information about the treatment on redundancy payments on the following link:

<https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/about-work-and-income/news/2020/redundancy-payments-and-benefits.html>

Other Changes

Benefit increases from 1 April 2020

On 1 April 2020, main benefit rates increased by 3.09%, which was in line with changes to the average wage. Previously the annual adjustment was based on the Consumers Price Index (CPI).

There was also an increase of \$25 a week to main benefits as part of the Government's response to COVID-19 (for couples, the increase was \$25 in total).

This increase to the after-tax rate applied to:

- Jobseeker Support
- Sole Parent Support
- Supported Living Payment
- Young Parent Payment
- Youth Payment

NZ Super and Veteran's Pension increased by 3.08% on 1 April, so they remain at 66% of the net average wage.

Earn more before the benefit reduces

From 1 April 2020, people receiving a benefit were able to earn more each week before their benefit reduces. This is sometimes called the abatement threshold.

Benefit	Abatement thresholds	
	Previous	1 April 2020
Jobseeker Support	\$80	\$90
Sole parents and Supported Living Payment	\$100	\$115
NZ Super or Veteran's Pension with a non-qualifying partner	\$100	\$115

Any changes to payments were calculated automatically.

Sole parents – removing section 192 (formerly 70A)

Prior to 1 April 2020, if you received a benefit paid at a sole parent rate, and you didn't apply for child support or name the other parent of your child, your benefit payment was reduced.

From 1 April 2020, sole parent benefits are no longer be reduced because of this. Any changes to payments were made automatically.

This change took effect from 1 April 2020 and is not backdated.

Further information and other support can be found on the following link:

<https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/about-work-and-income/news/2020/income-support-package.html>

Handy references

The following page has useful links and information about the ROD/BRC process including the expense claim form, information packs and the HIYU newsletter:

<https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/contact-us/complaints/review-of-decision.html>

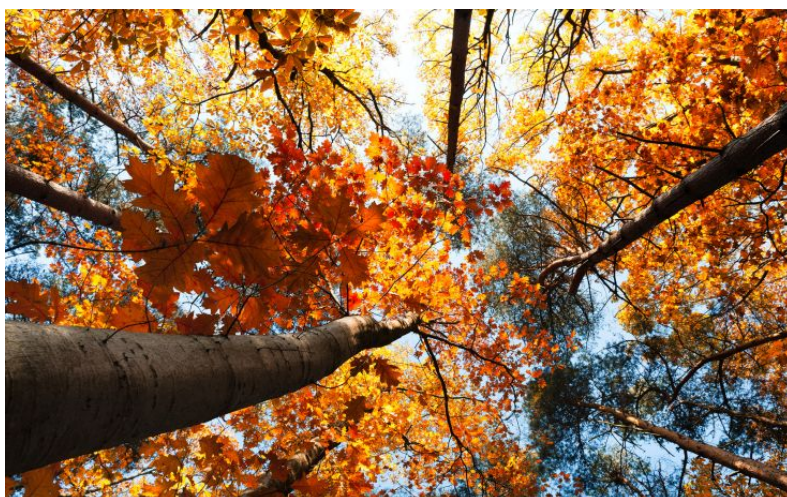
Feedback

Please let us know if you find these newsletters useful or if there is other information that you would like included in these. The Complaints Management Team welcomes any feedback from you. The team's contact details are below.

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