

Memo

To:

Melissa Gill, DCE Organisational Assurance and Communication

Liz Jones, Acting DCE Service Delivery

From:

Amy Henare, Director DCE Office Service Delivery

Date:

22 July 2021

Security level: In confidence

Wage Subsidy Scheme: Audit NZ and OAG Recommendations

Purpose

 This memo seeks acceptance of the recommendations from, and the Ministry's proposed response to, the Office of the Auditor General's and Audit NZ's respective audits of the Wage Subsidy Schemes.

Summary

- 2. The Auditor-General released his report, Management of the Wage Subsidy Scheme, on 11 May 2021. This report was a performance audit of the Wage Subsidy Scheme, and explored the agency response in developing and implementing the Schemes. Agencies included in the audit were the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry), the Treasury (TSY), Inland Revenue (IR), and the Ministry of Innovation and Employment (MBIE).
- 3. The report contained recommendations for agencies to consider as part of post-scheme integrity and for the design and development of any future schemes.
- 4. In the Audit NZ performance audit of the Ministry for 2019/20, recommendations for the Schemes were included that align with the Auditor-General's recommendations.

Recommendations

- 5. We recommend that you:
 - a) **accept** the Ministry's proposed responses detailed in paragraph 9 be implemented following the recommendations of both Audit NZ and the Auditor-General

accept / not accept

accept / not accept

Melissa Gill

Liz Jones

b) agree that following your acceptance these responses will be implemented immediately

agree / disagree

Melissa Gill

Liz Jones

c) note that business units will update their DCE on progress of the responses monthly until completed.

Melissa Gill

Date

Date

Liz Jones

Acting Deputy Chief Executive Service Delivery

Date

Background

6. Audit NZ reviewed the Wage Subsidy Schemes as part of their annual performance audit of the Ministry, to 30 June 2020. In their report dated 30 March 2021, they recommended that the Ministry:

Audit NZ Rec 1	Seek positive confirmation (this could be targeted towards larger or risk indicated applicants) that recipients confirm compliance with eligibility criteria and obligations.
Audit NZ Rec 2	Analyse the results of all integrity and assurance work undertaken to date to inform a risk-based assessment of next steps, and what further integrity work needs to be completed, if any, to strengthen the integrity of the scheme.

7. The Auditor-General also conducted a performance audit to review how well the Government managed the Wage Subsidy Scheme. In their report published 11 May 2021¹, they recommended that the Ministry (and agencies):

OAG Rec 1	Ensure that criteria are sufficiently clear and complete to allow applicant information to be adequately verified.						
OAG Rec 2	Put in place robust post-payment verification measures, including risk-based audits against source documentation, to mitigate the risks of using a high-trust approach.						
OAG Rec 3	Test the reliability of a sample of the post-payment assurance work it carried out against documentary evidence held by applicants.						
OAG Rec 4a	Seek written confirmation from applicants (which could be targeted towards larger or risk-indicated applicants) of compliance with the eligibility criteria and the obligations of receiving the subsidy.						
OAG Rec 4b	Pursue prosecutions to recover funds and/or to hold businesses to account for potentially unlawful behaviour.						
OAG Rec 5 ²	Carry out timely evaluation of the development, operation, and impact of the Wage Subsidy Scheme and use the findings to inform preparation for future crisis-support schemes.						

8. The Ministry has since outlined its expected response to the recommendations, in effect accepting and acting on the recommendations, to joint Ministers³ and the Financial Expenditure Committee⁴.

¹ https://oag.parliament.nz/2021/wage-subsidy

 $^{^2}$ This recommendation was made to the Ministry, the Inland Revenue Department, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, and the Treasury.

³ REP/21/3/327 (T2021/849) Joint Report: Response to the Auditor-General's Performance Audit of the COVID-19 Wage Subsidy

⁴ https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/sc/submissions-and-advice/document/53SCFE_EVI_111276_FE1679/ministry-of-social-development

9. Work has been underway since March 2021 to determine the response to the recommendations, as outlined below:

Audit NZ Rec 1	Seek positive confirmation (this could be targeted towards larger or risk indicated applicants) that recipients confirm compliance with eligibility criteria and obligations. Accepted: See response to OAG Rec 4a.					
Audit NZ Rec 2 Analyse the results of all integrity and assurance work undert date to inform a risk-based assessment of next steps, an further integrity work needs to be completed, if any, to streethe integrity of the scheme. Accepted: This work is dependent on results from the Microspanse to OAG Ros 3 and OAG Ros 43						
OAG Rec 1	response to OAG Rec 3 and OAG Rec 4a. Ensure that criteria are sufficiently clear and complete to allow applicant information to be adequately verified. Accepted: This will be applied for any future schemes.					
OAG Rec 2	Put in place robust post-payment verification measures, including risk-based audits against source documentation, to mitigate the risks of using a high-trust approach.					
	Accepted: Post-payment integrity checks for the WSSMAR21 scheme will include routinely seeking this evidence from recipients. It is intended that any future schemes will also include this measure. For the March 2021 Wage Subsidy, the declaration was updated to expressly require applicants to prepare and retain evidence that they met the required revenue decline test.					
OAG Rec 3	Test the reliability of a sample of the post-payment assurance work it carried out against documentary evidence held by applicants. Accepted: We will begin seeking documentary evidence from a sample of 339 recipients for whom we previously completed post-payment integrity checks. Additional risk analysis conducted by IRD will support the engagement with applicants. We expect that confirming documentary evidence for this sample could take around three months. IR compliance staff (nine FTE) have been seconded for three months to support this work.					
OAG Rec 4a	Seek written confirmation from applicants (which could be targeted towards larger or risk-indicated applicants) of compliance with the eligibility criteria and the obligations of receiving the subsidy. Accepted: MSD is preparing a sample of 1,000 original Wage Subsidy recipients to seek confirmation of their eligibility for that scheme and compliance with their obligations. This sample will be weighted towards larger employers but will still include a range of business sizes. Contact with recipients via email survey was expected to start in late June 2021 but delayed due to the change to Alert Level 2 in Wellington from 23 June 2021.					

OAG Rec 4b Pursue prosecutions to recover funds and/or to hold businesses to account for potentially unlawful behaviour. Accepted: The Ministry continues to work with Police to gather evidence to support Wage Subsidy investigations via production orders as provided for in the Search and Surveillance Act 2012. MSD has implemented an enforcement and recovery framework to support decisions relating to civil recovery or criminal prosecution (or other actions). All prosecution decisions will be taken in line with the Solicitor-General's quidelines. We are working through a number of investigations and decisions will be made in the coming months. OAG Rec 5 Carry out timely evaluation of the development, operation, and impact of the Wage Subsidy Scheme and use the findings to inform preparation for future crisis-support schemes. Accepted: A Working Group including representatives from MSD, IR, MBIE, and Treasury has been meeting weekly to co-ordinate and discuss monitoring and evaluation of the Wage Subsidy Scheme. An evaluation approach documenting key evaluation questions and plans for procurement of a process and outcome evaluation of the Scheme has been developed. A cross-agency Steering Group has also been established to provide high-level oversight of the evaluation and to ensure that evaluation findings have influence within the participating agencies. The Working Group has developed a preliminary intervention logic for the Wage Subsidy Scheme which will be shared with the Steering Group as well as the external supplier(s) procured to conduct the evaluation.

10. The following sections outline the Ministry's response for the recommendations, and including decisions made on the responses. This does not necessarily preclude further work to address the recommendations being required or undertaken in future.

Assurance over our integrity programme

- 11. Audit NZ recommendation 2 recommended that the Ministry "analyse the results of all integrity and assurance work undertaken to date, to inform a risk-based assessment of next steps, and what further integrity work needs to be completed, if any, to strengthen the integrity of the scheme." To address this recommendation, we will use insights from the work to address OAG recommendations 3 and 4a, and Audit NZ recommendation 1, as described below, to inform the approach.
- 12. This work relates to the Wage Subsidy Enhanced Scheme introduced on 27 March 2020 (lasting one day) and the Wage Subsidy Modified Scheme introduced on 28 March 2020. Legally these are two different schemes, operationally they are both referred to as the "Enhanced Scheme" and for the purposes of this paper are referred to as WS2. WS2 ended on 9 June 2020.
- 13. We have not focused on later schemes, because enhanced integrity controls were in place by 10 June 2020 for the Wage Subsidy Extension (WSX) and Wage Subsidy Resurgence

(WSR) payments, whereby applications which posed one or more integrity risks⁵ were exceptioned for further integrity checks before payment was made (of which around 50% of exceptions were declined).

14. Table 1 shows the number of businesses paid at least one WS2 payment, by business size, as at 20 November 2020:

Business size	Number of businesses	Total amount paid
Sole Trader	216,012	\$1,440,997,883.30
1-5 staff	131,275	\$1,971,565,323.40
6-19 staff	38,947	\$2,498,957,987.79
20-29 staff	4,472	\$702,025,489.10
30-39 staff	1,922	\$436,033,897.40
40-49 staff	1,040	\$306,845,658.20
50-59 staff	681	\$246,557,134.00
60-69 staff	433	\$187,137,965.40
70-79 staff	335	\$168,073,158.40
80-89 staff	252	\$143,136,049.40
90-99 staff	180	\$113,661,545.60
100-499 staff	1,129	\$1,446,747,655.28
500-999	90	\$397,853,325.40
Over 1000 staff	49	\$888,474,866.40
Total	396,817	\$10,948,067,939.06

Responding to OAG recommendation 3

- 15. To respond to the recommendation to test the reliability of a sample of the post-payment assurance work carried out, it has been determined that the focus should be on random integrity checks undertaken across recipients of WS2, as post-payment checks shifted over time towards a targeted approach based on joint risk analysis undertaken with IR⁶.
- 16. When making the declaration, applicants consented to providing the Ministry with information about them, their business and (with their consent) the employees named in the application to the extent required by the Ministry to make decisions about the application, and to review any subsidy granted, and how any subsidy granted is paid to employees. This consent provides the Ministry with the legal authority to carry out these checks.
- 17. A random sample of WS2 recipients who had applied between 27 March 2020 and 22 May 2020, and who were subject to a random post-payment integrity check, will be contacted to discuss their eligibility to WS2 and asked to provide documentary evidence to that effect.

⁵ Exceptioned applications were identified from integrity work undertaken to date (including random integrity checks, the resolution of allegations of Wage Subsidy misuse, and investigations) and joint risk analysis undertaken with IR.

⁶ In early May 2020, when post-payment integrity checks were predominantly random, only 5% of applicants subject to these checks were found to require a partial or full repayment. By the end of October 2020, when post-payment integrity checks were predominantly targeted, repayments were required in 15% of cases.

- 18. The random sample was selected as follows:
 - a) Of the 3,751 random integrity checks conducted to date, a portal used to record these checks early in the schemes' integrity programme was able to provide an extract of 2,433 applicants to select from, and comprised of:
 - 1,204 sole traders
 - 1,127 employers with 25 or more employees
 - 102 employers with 80 or more employees, or those unable to be contacted.
 - b) Recipients who have since made a full repayment, and those whose eligibility has or will be determined through the investigation process (i.e. referred for investigation prior to the sampling exercise), were excluded from selection.
 - c) Insights MSD then conducted a simple stratified random sampling exercise, whereby two strata were identified to sample from; sole traders and employers with up to five employees (who represented a significant volume of the applications received for WS2), and employers with six or more employees.
- 19. This resulted in a random sample of 339 WS1 recipients⁷, representing 486 WS2 applications. This sample makes up nine percent of the total random integrity checks undertaken and 0.5% of total WS2 expenditure:

Business size	Number of businesses	Total staff	Total paid	Total repaid	Net paid
Sole Trader	53	53	\$368,280	\$700	\$367,580
1-5 staff	125	293	\$2,016,607	\$25,860	\$1,990,747
6-29 staff	118	1,303	\$8,672,700	\$60,636	\$8,612,064
30-49 staff	18	720	\$4,771,234	\$191,199	\$4,580,034
Over 50 staff	25	6,097	\$40,281,617	\$364,126	\$39,917,491
Total	339	8,466	\$56,110,438	\$642,521	\$55,467,916

20. We engaged with IR to understand what analysis they could provide under existing legal authorities described in the information sharing MOUs. Under the declaration, applicants consent to the Ministry sharing information about applications with other agencies such as IR to the extent necessary to make decisions about the application and to review and audit any subsidy that is granted. Pursuant to cl 23(b) of Schedule 7 of the Tax Administration Act 1994, IR may disclose to MSD information about a person or entity for the purposes of enabling MSD to carry out an audit, review or other enforcement function in relation to COVID-19 related assistance provided to a person or entity. MSD and IR have an MOU that describes how information may be sought and disclosed under these legal authorities. Schedule 5 of the MSD-IR Wage Subsidy COVID-19 MOU signed June 2020 (IR support for MSD audit function in relation to Subsidies) also states that "MSD will decide according to agreed risk categories which audits are to be pursued" - in this case the Ministry will provide IR with the random sample for review. Schedule 5 also specifies that MSD may request information from IR which may include "a focus on review of risk/issue against IR information".

⁷ 339 recipients comprised of 178 sole traders or employers with 5 or fewer employees with a margin of error of 6.95%, and 161 employers with six or more employees with a margin of error of 6.15%.

- 21.IR undertook analysis at the application level regarding three key eligibility criteria, indicating where:
 - there was a GST reduction of 30% between the base month and at least one of the previous or subsequent months, as a proxy indicator for meeting the required 30% revenue drop eligibility criterion for WS2
 - there has been a less than 5% reduction in employee numbers during the WS1 subsidy timeframe, as a proxy indicator for meeting the requirement to retain employees for the period covered by the subsidy
 - PAYE has remained within \$15,000 for each of the previous and subsequent 3-month periods, as a proxy indicator that the subsidy was passed on to employees (noting that this indicator is expected to only highlight significant PAYE discrepancies, and targeted to larger employees).
- 22. Results of this indicative analysis showed that just over 8% of the sample may not have met the required revenue drop and just over 6% of the sample may not have retained the employees applied for. These were primarily in small to medium business size recipients, with 6-29 staff.
- 23. It is expected that confirming documentary evidence for the sample of 339 recipients could take around three months, and nine IR compliance staff have been seconded to support this work over that period.
- 24. The process guidance for this assurance work is being reviewed by MSD Legal. Staff will use the analysis provided to tailor engagement with the recipients, to best target the evidence or confirmation required against the eligibility criteria.
- 25. Where fraud is suspected, cases will be referred for further investigation.

Responding to Audit NZ recommendation 1 and OAG recommendation 4a

- 26. To respond to the recommendation to seek written confirmation of compliance from applicants, it has been determined to focus this work on larger employers as suggested by Audit NZ and the OAG. Nearly 70% of WS1 expenditure (\$7.54 billion) went to recipients with six or more employees.
- 27. When making the declaration, applicants consented to providing the Ministry with information about them, their business and (with their consent) the employees named in the application to the extent required by the Ministry to make decisions about the application, and to review any subsidy granted, and how any subsidy granted is paid to employees. This consent provides the Ministry with the legal authority to seek the confirmation.
- 28. A random sample of 1,0008 WS2 recipients who had applied between 28 March 20209 and 22 May 2020 will be contacted by email survey to confirm their eligibility and compliance with obligations for the subsidy received.

⁸ Originally a sample of 800 was expected but this was adjusted to 1,000 to mitigate the risk of low response rates.

⁹ The Wage Subsidy Scheme and associated declaration was modified from 4pm 27 March 2020 to provide greater connectivity to employers and their workers during lockdown, as originally intended [CAB-20-MIN-0105 refers].

- 29. The random sample was selected as follows:
 - a) A pool of 49,530 WS2 recipients with six or more employees was identified, in line with the OAG recommendation that noted the sample could be weighted towards larger employers
 - b) Recipients who have since made a full repayment, and those whose eligibility has or will be determined through the investigation process (i.e. referred for investigation prior to the sampling exercise) have been excluded from selection.
 - c) Insights MSD then conducted a simple stratified random sampling exercise, whereby three strata were identified to sample from: employers with six to 29 employees, employers with 30 to 79 employees, and employers with 80 or more employees.
- 30. This resulted in a random sample of 1,000 WS1 recipients¹⁰, representing 2% of WS2 recipients and 10% of total WS2 expenditure:

Business size	Number of businesses	Total staff	Total paid	Total repaid	Net paid
6-29 staff	200	2,512	\$16,357,976	\$246,537	\$16,111,439
30-79 staff	300	13,217	\$87,905,772	\$1,969,135	\$85,936,637
Over 80 staff	500	153,516	\$1,019,886,192	\$65,525,570	\$954,360,622
Total	1000	169,245	\$1,124,149,940	\$67,741,243	\$1,056,408,697

- 31. The survey will be sent through a weblink in an email. It will collect identifying information from the applicant and asks for a Yes / No response when asked "Has your business met both the eligibility criteria and obligations for the 2020 COVID-19 Wage Subsidy that you received?"
- 32. The implementation team will receive and collate responses. Recipients who open the email but do not click on the survey link will receive a second email as a reminder. Recipients who do not open the email will receive two reminder emails. Once all reminders have been sent, the implementation team will be responsible for assessing any non-responders. This will include a desk-based review and attempts to speak directly with the employer to facilitate the completion of the survey.
- 33. If the applicant responds No to the survey question, the Refunds team (Client Services Debt Management) will contact the applicant to discuss repayment.
- 34. Privacy have been consulted in the development of this survey and requested the reason for collecting this information was outlined (See Appendix 1 for a copy of the survey).

Responding to OAG recommendation 1

35. To respond to the recommendation to ensure scheme criteria are sufficiently clear and complete to allow applicant information to be adequately verified, MSD Legal is reviewing operational policy and communications materials to ensure they are consistent with the legal framework of the declarations, which each reflect the Cabinet decisions.

¹⁰ With a margin of error of 5.56%.

Responding to OAG recommendation 2

- 36. To respond to the recommendation to put in place robust post-payment verification measures to mitigate the risks of using a high-trust approach, the declaration for the March 2021 Wage Subsidy (WSSMAR21) was updated to expressly require applicants to prepare and retain evidence that they met the required revenue drop. This was done on the basis that the draft recommendation made by the OAG would not change in substance in the final report tabled in Parliament.
- 37. Post-payment integrity checks for the WSSMAR21 scheme will include routinely seeking this evidence from recipients. It is intended that any future schemes will also include this measure.

Taking enforcement action

- 38. Regarding OAG recommendation 4b, to pursue prosecutions to recover funds and/or to hold businesses to account for potentially unlawful behaviour, the Ministry has worked with MSD Legal Out of scope Principal Lawyer) and Crown Solicitors Meredith Connell to develop its approach to civil recovery and criminal prosecution of WSS payments. This includes:
 - upskilling FIS staff to progress investigations within a different legislative framework
 i.e. the Crimes Act 1961, the Criminal Proceeds (Recovery) Act 2009
 - working with Police to gather evidence using Production Orders under the Search and Surveillance Act 2012
 - finalising our enforcement and recovery decision-making framework to outline where criminal or civil enforcement and recovery actions are appropriate, and ensure these decisions are made robustly and consistently
 - developing guidance and processes for staff to support their work within the framework
 - establishing a WSS Recovery and Response Panel to makes decisions on civil recover and criminal prosecutions in accordance with apply the Public Interest Test (as per the Solicitor-General Guidelines) on cases recommended for criminal prosecution, and to make decisions on civil enforcement and recovery responses where appropriate.
- 39. The WSS Recovery and Response Panel first convened on 22 February 2021. Investigations are ongoing, with cases being actively considered for civil recovery and criminal prosecutions. To date, a total of five cases have been approved for civil recovery, pending an opportunity for those employers to repay the money in response to a final request. MDS Legal has instructed Meredith Connell to commence proceedings in respect of one of those cases.

Evaluating the Wage Subsidy schemes

- 40. On 1 March 2021, Cabinet authorised joint ministers to draw down up to \$1 million from the COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund (CRRF) for the Ministry to undertake an evaluation of the Wage Subsidy Schemes (WSSMAR21 and prior).
- 41. A working group was established in early 2021, which includes representatives from the Ministry, IR, MBIE, and TSY. This group was established to coordinate an evaluation of the Wage Subsidy Scheme. The group continues to meet weekly.

- 42. A high-level evaluation approach has been developed by the working group and reviewed by a cross-agency steering group overseeing the evaluation. Key decisions relating to the evaluation that have been documented in the high-level evaluation approach include:
 - There will be two key components of the evaluation: a scoping/process evaluation component and an outcome evaluation component
 - Both of these components will be procured by external suppliers to ensure the integrity of evaluation findings
 - The key evaluation questions we expect to be answered by the chosen supplier(s)
 - The initial scoping phase to be completed by supplier(s) procured for the process evaluation will include development of a comprehensive evaluation plan, intervention logic, communications strategy, and success rubrics for both the process and outcome evaluation
 - A final report on process evaluation findings is expected in June 2022 and a final report on outcome evaluation findings is expected in December 2022. Where possible interim findings will be released prior to the final reports.
- 43. A preliminary intervention logic for the Wage Subsidy Scheme has been refined by Working Group members and will also be reviewed at the next Steering Group meeting. Feedback from the Steering Group will be used to finalise the logic so that it may be shared with external supplier(s) procured to conduct the evaluation.

Attachments

Appendix 1 Wage Subsidy confirmation – Work and Income (Survey)

Appendix 1 Wage Subsidy confirmation - Work and Income

2020 COVID-19 Wage Subsidy

OFFICIAL INTO PRINTIPO PRINTIP Please fill in the details below to confirm if your business met all the eligibility criteria and obligations for the 2020 COVID-19 Wage Subsidy. We're asking for this information to confirm that businesses met all obligations and eligibility. criteria. If you aren't able to confirm that, we'll be in touch. It could be that you need to make a repayment

All questions must be arowered except those marked as highword! f.

Keeping a copy

Eyou want to keep a copy of this form for your records, fill it out and print it before submitter

You			

First name (received)

The fast name of the person completing this form. The form does not have to be completed by the same person who originally applied for the 2020 COVID-19 Wage Subsidy.

Surname or family name (required)

The surname or family name of the person completing this form. The form does not have to be completed by the same person who originally applied for the 2020 COVID-19 Wage Subsidy.

IR Customer name (Business name) (required)

Business ERD Number (required)

This is the S or 9-digit number issued to you by Inland Revenue and used when you applied for the 2020 COVID-19 Wage Subsidy.

Contact details

Phone number (required)

If you enter a landline, please include area code

Email address (aptional)

Flease provide an email address only if you would like us to email you to assange a time to call

Confirmation form details

Has your business met both the eligibility criteria and obligations for the 2020 COVID-19 Wage Subsidy that you received? (required)

If you predicted your business would be eligible and would meet the obligations at the time your business applied, but later featised the publicss was not employed and for old not meet obligations, answer No. This may result in your business needing to make a full or partial referred of the Sebsidy.

Check the eligibility criteria and obbigations in the declaration

Yes

Declarations

- The information I have provided as true and correct.
- I have read the privacy information and an aware of bow my personal information will be used by the Ministry of Social Development.

Submit this form