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# Views on New Zealand's welfare system

A SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES TO  
THE WELFARE EXPERT ADVISORY GROUP

BACKGROUND PAPER

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 We undertook broad consultation

The Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG) terms of reference called for an approach that prioritised the experience of people interacting with the welfare system and was participatory and independent. WEAG were required to appropriate consultation with the public and key stakeholder groups, including, but not limited to, iwi and Māori, Pacific People and disabled people; it was their view that consultation would be broad, impartial, accessible and not discriminatory and would allow those most affected by the welfare system to be heard.

This paper summarises the results of the Welfare Expert Advisory Group's national consultation process, which involved: i) a formal call for submissions using Survey Monkey as the prime mechanism; ii) face-to-face meetings involving more than 1,300 individuals and many organisations from throughout New Zealand; and iii) unprompted submissions. We analysed 1,348 written submissions, as well as extensive notes from the face-to-face meetings in the preparation of this report.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 Our approach to summarising people's views

The survey and workshop questions were largely open-ended. This provided for an unlimited range of responses, making accurate quantitative analysis (how many times people said something) impractical. Instead we used a qualitative thematic analysis, with information and ideas expressed in submissions collated by theme. We did our best to capture the full range of perspectives. We use terms like *many*, *some* and *few* to give a sense of how frequently a topic or idea was raised.

We have made frequent use of representative quotes from the submissions and meetings. We have occasionally made slight modifications to improve readability but have taken pains not to change the tone or intent. More than a third of respondents asked for their views to be treated as confidential. Guided by that response, we decided not to name any of the individual respondents or attribute quotes to particular meetings where numbers of attendees were small. We have indicated their role, age, ethnicity or location where this helps the reader to appreciate their perspective or adds authority to the views. For the same reason, we have named organisations when quoting them.

While it was not possible to capture every aspect covered in the many submissions, some of which were very detailed, complex or technical, we are confident that the summary provides an accurate reflection of what people said and the key messages they wanted to share with the Advisory Group.<sup>2</sup>

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1 See Appendix 1 for additional information on the consultation process and survey questions.

2 See Appendix 2 for a list of the organisations that made written submissions.

## 2 Key messages

### 2.1 Change is needed

Many respondents expressed high expectations for significant changes as a result of this welfare reform process.

*It is essential that any reforms to the welfare system will ensure that people have adequate income, an adequate standard of living that allows them to live with dignity, meet their basic human needs and have the opportunity to flourish. Support should be sufficient to address inequalities and inequity. The welfare system should ensure a just and inclusive society where all people are valued and can reach their full potential. When people interact with the welfare system, they should be treated with respect, compassion and dignity. [Individual respondent]*

### 2.2 Overall system performance is poor

The overwhelming messages were:

- It is unacceptable that many New Zealanders, and children in particular, are living in poverty.
- The welfare system is not working well and is failing on many levels.

### 2.3 The system needs to be more values-driven

Overall, the following values were identified as critical to a well-functioning welfare system:

- Honouring and upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
- Putting children first – the system must ensure that children have a good start in life and are not disadvantaged when they or their families need welfare support.
- Putting people at the centre – being caring, compassionate and empathetic towards those seeking support; being mana enhancing – ensuring dignity and respect and taking a strengths-based approach. Practising whakawhanaungatanga – valuing relationships and seeing people in the context of, and working with, their families, whānau, hapū, iwi and community.
- Having a fair and just system that is transparent and accountable, that is free from discrimination and that doesn't place people in severe hardship.
- Using a rights-based approach where welfare support is available to all who need it, and people's fundamental human rights are upheld.

### 2.4 The welfare system is not working for Māori

The Treaty guarantees Māori participation, partnership and protection, but this is not upheld in the design and operation of the welfare system. Calls were made for:

- Significant improvements in cultural awareness and responsiveness.
- Partnership and collaboration with Māori, including local hapū and iwi, in the design and delivery of welfare support.
- Tino rangatiratanga – providing the opportunity for Māori to determine how their needs are met, building on Whānau Ora approaches.

## 2.5 Work and Income is not easy to engage with

While there are pockets of excellence, those who use Work and Income services and those who support them (including Work and Income staff) observe that:

- Often people are not being treated well, or with dignity and respect. Few staff are showing compassion and empathy for those who need assistance.
- There needs to be more case managers to work with welfare recipients to ensure continuity of support and to be able to deal with the complexity of people's situations.
- Work and Income staff need more training in customer service and communication, as well as training to understand and deal with the challenges of people with mental illness, certain health conditions and disabilities.
- There is a need for more designated case managers to understand people's unique circumstances and to support people to become as independent as possible in the longer term.
- Co-ordination and referral systems are needed between the Ministry of Social Development and the government agencies providing health, housing and education assistance to ensure that an individual or family's needs are addressed and followed up.
- People are not receiving good advice about all the entitlements and assistance that are applicable to them.

## 2.6 Employment and other support services are lacking

Support services are seen as being as important as income support. It was suggested that:

- There needs to be more support and assistance from Work and Income for people preparing to enter the workforce and maintaining employment while they are in work.
- People with underlying mental health conditions and addiction issues need to be provided with supports that will enable them to recover, contribute fully as members of the community and participate in the paid workforce once they are ready.
- People should have access to warm, dry and healthy homes as a basic right; having the protection of a home is essential for wellbeing.
- Employment support needs to be appropriate and tailored to individual needs and circumstances.
- More training opportunities and courses are needed for people to up-skill or learn new skills in a changing work environment.
- More social housing is needed to ensure there is a level of quality affordable rental accommodation that meets demand.

## 2.7 Income support is inadequate

With respect to income support, key themes were that:

- No one should live in poverty – they should have enough income to live with dignity, be able to participate fully in community life and live their lives fully rather than just survive.
- Welfare support should be enough to cover the costs associated with everyday life – it should meet basic needs and cover accommodation, food, power, phone, health and dental care, education and transport.
- Health and dental care should prioritise good long-term health outcomes over low-cost interventions that only address the immediate need.
- The fullest support should be available, and penalties or sanctions should not be applied, especially where a household includes dependent children.
- Those needing support should be treated as individuals and not be penalised, lose their autonomy or be financially dependent on another person because they are in a relationship.
- Stand-downs were considered punitive and should be abolished.

## 2.8 Disabled people and people with long-term health conditions deserve better

We heard many people talk about the experiences of those with health conditions and disabilities, largely in regard to inherent problems within the system but also in regard to the lack of understanding of Work and Income staff. Suggestions included:

- There was widespread agreement that disabled people and people who have long-term health conditions that mean they can't work need more financial support than others to achieve a decent quality of life. This is due to the higher costs of transport, housing, medical care and similar.
- Processes should be reasonable and less onerous, for example, people shouldn't have to re-establish eligibility so frequently.
- Many felt the additional costs related to health and disability needed to be met to avoid people being forced into extreme material hardship or debt to meet these costs from their limited income.
- Disabled people and people with long-term health conditions should be supported to find and retain suitable work even if they require long-term welfare support.
- Additional support is required to enable some disabled people and people with long-term health conditions to participate fully and have good lives.
- Carers of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions should have their work recognised as essential and demanding and should be given an increased level of financial support and respite.

## 3 Values that should underpin the system

Respondents had a clear vision of what they thought the purpose of the welfare system should be, which provides a useful context for understanding the values they think should underpin it – there was a high level of consistency in the responses.

### 3.1 Purpose of the welfare system

#### **New Zealanders value the welfare system**

Many respondents regard New Zealand's welfare system as a taonga and are proud that we have a welfare system.

*That we have a welfare system at all is a massive thumbs up for New Zealand. As a beneficiary, it lets me live my life, in a reasonable manner, so I appreciate it very much. [Welfare recipient]*

*Us beneficiaries need to respect WINZ back and appreciate that the welfare system is a blessing. Compared to other countries. I know I'd be dead without it. [Welfare recipient]*

*I think the principle of supporting and nurturing those who need help is excellent, and necessary for a functioning society. [Welfare recipient]*

Very few respondents, however, considered that our current welfare system is in good shape.

*I guess, that we've got one is the best thing about it. We have got it, we pay for it out of all our taxes and we need to make it work well – that is, without blame and without poverty. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Very little appears to be working in the current welfare system. If it was working well, New Zealand would not be shown to be under-functioning in nearly all of the United Nations statistics related to social justice. [NGO employee]*

#### **Support for the most vulnerable**

There was wide consensus that the welfare system should be there to support and assist the most vulnerable people in our communities.

The overwhelming majority of respondents felt that the system should provide a much greater level of support to ensure that no one suffers undue hardship and that children are not disadvantaged.

*The primary objectives should be to support those who are unable, through no fault of their own to work, to identify barriers to finding suitable work and help reduce them, to support those who cannot work due to illness to live a dignified existence, to support those who are raising children or caring for those with an illness or disability. [Welfare recipient]*

*Our welfare system should be there to help people if needed. That benefit should be enough to cover the costs associated with everyday life. There should be no judgement towards that person/s and assistance needs to be immediate. [Friend or family member of a welfare recipient]*

A few respondents thought support through the welfare system should be tightly targeted and incentivise people to seek paid work.

*Support through the welfare system should be only for those in dire need – those who can work should be encouraged to do so, not incentivised with free money. Work will be easier for people to find as we invest in creating an economy that supports business growth over taking from the rich to give to the poor. [A friend or family member of a welfare recipient]*

*Provide the same level of support, with more stringent protocols for assessing those who can go on the benefit and those who can STAY on the benefit long term. [An employee]*

## **A decent standard of living**

Many respondents suggested that the welfare system should provide people with a decent standard of living so that they could get on with their lives, whether that meant being able to care for children or other dependants, moving into paid work or being able to participate in society.

*Give people their basic needs, including better access to health care, mental health care, and access to transport. Then, after that is secured, more people will be able to focus on whatever they need to do to get work or give back to the community. [Parent with dependent children]*

*We could house everyone in warm and dry conditions. We could ensure that everyone has enough food to eat. [Employee]*

*Welfare should be provided in a way that ensures a minimum standard of living for all New Zealanders. Everyone has basic needs that the welfare system can provide a safety net for if people get into poverty or hardship. [Government employee, not MSD]*

“Dignity” was a term that came up again and again, with many people wanting to see levels of income support that enabled people to live with dignity and participate in their communities.

*I think people that are on the benefit should not look, experience or feel different to anyone else in our country. I think people receiving benefits or welfare supports should be completely supported to thrive and reviewed annually depending on their benefit. [Past welfare recipient]*

A few respondents referenced the work of the 1972 Royal Commission on Social Security, suggesting that its vision for the welfare system is still relevant today.

*The community is responsible for giving dependent people a standard of living consistent with human dignity and approaching that enjoyed by the majority, irrespective of the cause of dependency. We believe, further, that the community responsibility should be discharged in a way which does not stifle personal initiative, nor unduly hinder anyone trying to preserve or even enhance living standards on retirement or during times of temporary disability. [Government employee]*

### Improving people's wellbeing the key objective

Many respondents considered that supporting and enabling people to achieve and maintain a good level of wellbeing should be the key objective of the system. They highlighted the inter-dependence of factors affecting wellbeing and the need for a holistic approach, with *Te Whare Tapa Wha* identified as a useful model. The system needed the flexibility to be responsive to individual circumstances. Focusing exclusively on getting a paid job, irrespective of the person's circumstances, strengths or aspirations was seen as counter to this objective. While not the primary beneficiary, enabling children and young people to have a good start in life was seen as a priority by many respondents.

## 3.2 Upholding the Treaty of Waitangi

Many respondents, both Māori and non-Māori, felt that the Treaty should underpin the welfare system. This would see the Treaty principles of protection, participation and partnership upheld and Māori values and culture would be integral to the design and delivery of the system.

*It is essential for the Crown and iwi and hapū to collaborate for positive impact for Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu for all New Zealand and the next generation of Māori. Ngāi Tahu are committed to co-constructing solutions as a Treaty partner with a clear responsibility for creating positive intergenerational outcomes. [Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu]*

*There is a need to embed the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi much more deeply – less about a safety net, more about self-determination and wellbeing frameworks for Māori. [Wellington Roundtable]*

*We want a welfare system that engages from a Tiriti o Waitangi perspective with Māori. Te Tiriti places an obligation on the Crown to work in partnership with Māori and design a welfare system that works as well for Māori as it does for others. The current system fails Māori both through inadequate levels of assistance and an individualised approach to accessing support that is more likely to exclude Māori. [NZ Council of Christian Social Services]*

See Section 4 for further discussion on Māori and the welfare system.

## 3.3 Children first

Respondents frequently stated that the best interests of children should be the primary consideration in the design of the welfare system, with many remarking that the poverty experienced by those on income support, and the impacts of stand downs, work obligations and sanctions in particular, has a profound impact on children and does not appear to be taken into account.

*The needs of children must be made paramount. Adequate benefit levels should be seen as: (i) the right of a child to have its needs met for adequate nutrition, health care (including dental care), warm safe housing and educational opportunity; and (ii) an investment in the future of this country. [Retiree]*

Some were critical of the impacts on children that result from the system's apparent focus on engaging in paid employment and felt there should be greater support for parents to stay at home to support their children, especially through their early years.

*Acknowledge that child poverty comes from adult poverty. Focus on what the children need and less on moving carers into paid work. Parenting is work, and it is vitally important for our society that it is done well. [NGO employee]*

*Where children are involved, provide as much support as is required to ensure the wellbeing of the children. Enough to provide for everything that child needs in order to flourish up until school age and then beyond. Single parents should be supported to only work part-time so that they can spend time with their children before and after school, have time to run the household and have energy to build a happy family life. [Welfare recipient]*

*Support parents who want to stay home with their pre-schoolers and nurture them themselves. There is huge benefit in this for healthy child development, especially for the first three years or so. Please draw on health professional knowledge for building healthy children long term (which will save the country money in the long term), not just a financial decision. [Past welfare recipient]*

The importance of parenting was often commented on, with many remarking that it is not given sufficient attention in the current system. Respondents made a number of suggestions for system improvements, including increased support for parents such as training in parenting skills and connection with support groups. Several suggested an additional payment at the beginning of the school year.

*At the start of every year, there needs to be a start-up payment for all New Zealanders for school costs as uniform and school stationery, laptops are huge. This should not be income tested as we want our kids to have the best start as possible. [Government employee, not MSD]*

The wellbeing of parents, especially sole parents, was also seen as needing to be given higher priority.

*Children's rights – WINZ do not value child development, parental attachment or mental health of children or mothers. [A friend or family member of a welfare recipient]*

*There should be a cap on the fee a doctor can charge a person with a community services card. Women who are on their own with children often don't attend the doctor's because of the cost. This is detrimental to their mental wellbeing as the mothers raising the next generation and the cycle of mental wellbeing for the family is affected by this. [Welfare recipient, retiree]*

The welfare system was seen as playing an important role in protecting children from immediate and longer-term family violence.

*It is good for vulnerable people who are stuck in violent relationships to know that they can get support if they choose to leave and become a solo parent. [Welfare recipient]*

## 3.4 Putting people at the centre

Many respondents described the need for a people-centred system, which was not their experience of the current system.

*It would help to care, to put people first. I reckon, a lot of the people who are beneficiaries are people who have been abused. They're adults, who were abused as children, who have grown up, and have gone on to be abusive, or lead abusive lives, and have raised children in an abusive environment. It's a cycle, of abuse, but I do think it's possible to break the chains, and it would be good if the government realised, the breakdown of people, has been from a breakdown in life, and that's caused all sorts of social damage. If we could fix and repair the damage, we can begin to rebuild our communities. [Sole parent, Māori]*

*ACC has a great value: "People Before Process", which WINZ could learn from this and adopt this value. [Welfare recipient]*

### Caring and respectful

The strongest theme emerging from the submissions was that the system needs to be caring and respectful towards those seeking support. More than a third of respondents used words such as caring, kindness, humanity, understanding, compassion and empathy when describing the behaviours that should be the norm among those working in the system and which should be reflected in system processes and rules.

*A key value that needs to drive the welfare system is compassion. Staff need to appreciate that the majority of clients are not there by choice, and that most would far rather regain their financial autonomy. [Welfare recipient]*

*Care about people, be kind, respect their way of life, be truthful to each other and form relationships. [Individual respondent]*

*Don't look down on us when we come to Work and Income for help. Individuals and whānau are struggling they need support not being degraded and put down. [Current welfare recipient, Pacific person]*

Respondents, most but not all of whom were Māori, frequently said whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, āwhinatanga, kaitiakitanga, tika, pono and aroha should feature strongly in our welfare system.

### Mana-enhancing

People also felt strongly that dignity and respect should be core elements of a system that valued the people it serves.

*A welfare system that supplements wages and living costs is indicative of wider economic and societal dysfunction. Our system attempts to respond to demand caused by this and, while it is predicated on the belief in universal human rights, it fails on the most basic level to safeguard human dignity. [Government employee]*

Only a very small minority felt that the current system is brought into disrepute by people choosing to be on income support, behaving strategically to maximise their benefits (for example, by having numerous children) or by cheating the system (for example, living with partners who have good incomes), and some felt this was widespread. A larger group acknowledged that while benefit fraud and inter-generational benefit dependence does occur, it is relatively infrequent.

Many said “beneficiary bashing” based on inaccurate stereotypes is profoundly unhelpful.

*Non-beneficiaries feel they are superior by being ripped off by beneficiaries living some life of languishing luxury. This undeservedly isolates people in communities and creates bigoted prejudice which makes people less likely to strive or look to improve their lives. Most New Zealanders have no idea of the barriers facing beneficiaries and it has created a culture of blaming beneficiaries for social problems or that they should be penalised somehow. [Individual respondent]*

Successive policy changes focused on increasing obligations and sanctions, and the negative language associated with that, were seen as strengthening these stereotypes.

*Basically, I think there’s a lot of evidence out there about what works and what doesn’t, but welfare (like crime prevention) has become an area where political sound-bites and scare-mongering has prevailed over effective policy. [Individual respondent]*

*We need to do more to repair the damage done by media, political and public “beneficiary bashing” – to change the majority attitude of the deserving and undeserving, to one of all deserving. [Past welfare recipient]*

For many, a great deal of shame is attached to seeking income support, and this is perceived as having increased in recent years.

*This is a system that is in place to help, not judge. And yet, we feel ashamed. I think a reframing and change of language could help. I’m sick of “beneficiary bashing”. I never tell anyone I’m just meeting that I’m on a benefit, because I don’t know how they’ll treat me. There’s this dichotomy between tax payers and beneficiaries – it would be great if more people understood that benefits are taxed, and many of us also pay secondary tax when we work. [Young welfare recipient, disabled]*

Many respondents felt that engagement with the system should be strengths-based and empowering. Valuing people, for example, by not wasting their time through inefficient processes or assuming that they are not contributing members of society, is also central to being people-centred and mana-enhancing.

## **Responsive to diversity**

A system that is responsive to diversity is seen as essential. In such a system, everyone would feel valued and welcomed, they would be understood and would be helped in ways that reflected their priorities and preferences. This was expressed particularly strongly by Māori and Pacific People, who often reported difficulty engaging with a system that is culturally alien to them, hostile to their belief systems and values and unable, or seemingly unwilling, to provide effective help.

Pacific People pointed out that the system does not recognise their cultural and linguistic diversity, and it assumes that what works for one group will work for all. As well as regional differences, there are distinctions between generations and between those who are born in New Zealand and those who have moved here later in life. Work and Income staff needed to appreciate the collective approach that operates throughout Pacific communities and the different definition of family that applies to Pacific People.

There was a strong call for Work and Income staff to develop cultural empathy and a better understanding of cultural obligations and the impact this can have on budgeting.

In addition to recognising the status of Māori as tangata whenua and their rights under the Treaty, responsiveness needs to take account of other culturally distinct worldviews and practices. Many people expressed an urgent need for more Work and Income information and forms to be provided in languages of all the people who need it.

*Specific attention should be paid to:*

- *the needs and aspirations of Pacific children, families and communities*
- *the needs, experiences and aspirations of migrant and refugee children, families and communities*
- *developing practices that are flexible and embrace whānau and collective decision making*
- *the provision of front-line social welfare services that are delivered in culturally responsive ways (for example, office locations and physical layouts, and language accessibility. [Barnados]*

*I want to see an equitably accessible welfare system where people don't feel ashamed to walk through those doors or make contact, but are received by faces and backgrounds that look like theirs where they feel comfortable. [Young respondent, past welfare recipient]*

### **A fair and just system**

Having a system that was seen to be fair and just was important to many people. Honesty and integrity were frequently described as essential requirements. Other attributes associated with a fair and just system included:

- Treating everyone well and being non-discriminatory
- Applying rules and processes that are transparent, consistent, coherent and easily understood
- Proactively sharing information about rights and entitlements
- Avoiding harsh compliance regimes and sanctions
- Providing a level of support that enables a reasonable standard of living and community participation without the need to incur debt
- Having a system that is accountable.

Upholding the Treaty was seen as integral to having a fair and just system, a system that will be more effective in improving the prospects for many Māori (and non-Māori).

## **3.5 A rights-based approach to social support**

As mentioned above, a small minority of respondents expressed the view that access to government support should be on an exceptions basis as a time-limited safety net of last resort for those deemed to be in genuine need. Some saw communities as a better alternative for supporting those in need.

*The less involvement/control by government, the better for any individual to feel empowered, the better for society in the long run. Put it back on the communities to deal with it, as they usually have the best answers to their local problems. Anything run by government is usually lagging behind to anything run by communities, good NGOs, maraes, churches, synagogues, temples, etc. [Government employee]*

Some respondents took the view that there should be a limit on the length of time a person could receive Jobseeker Support; a period of five years was mentioned by a few respondents.

*Support everyone who needs it for the time that they need it. Help them out of their situation. But make sure that everyone knows that there are limits to benefits; and that the rewards of financial stability do not come from the welfare system. This means that there must be a reducing benefit over time to encourage people to move from the benefits into a self-supporting lifestyle (and work-style). [A friend or family member of a welfare recipient]*

Most respondents, however, expressed the view that universal access to social and financial security (alongside access to housing, health and disability services and education) was fundamental to protecting people's basic human rights. Several respondents noted that it is in the best interests of all society that we have a welfare system, not just those who are directly supported.

*We provide a social safety net because society needs a safety net – without one, it's worse for everyone not just the people who fall through the cracks. [MSD employee]*

*Social welfare should not be considered a privilege. If people are receiving benefits in any way shape or form, for the most part it's because it is an absolute necessity. In no way is support for food, shelter, clothing and participation in society a privilege, in this society it should be a fundamental right. [Pacific respondent]*

The benefits of a strong welfare system for New Zealand's future social and economic prosperity were also noted.

*The values that should underpin the welfare system are: from each according to their means, to each according to their needs. We should contribute through a progressive taxation system to the support of our society so that future generations will be able to enjoy the same or better prosperity we have had. We all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. From the 1930s, NZ enjoyed a good standard of living, created by successive governments. This enabled business to do well, in a stable, well-regulated society, with a healthy, educated, well-housed and employed population from which to recruit staff, and which was a reliable market for goods produced. The commitment to social values was withdrawn from the mid-1980s with the promotion of neoliberal economic ideologies based on greed and individualism instead of social values. [Retiree, Māori]*

Some respondents thought there should be higher taxes for the wealthy in order to provide more support for people on low incomes.

*Spend less on chasing benefit fraud and MORE on chasing tax fraud/evasion/avoidance – more is lost/stolen this way. Tax the rich more. [Welfare recipient]*

*Tax profits at a much higher rate in order to start to produce something more approaching equality again in our society. Bring in a capital gains tax for every property except the family home. But abolish GST, petrol taxes and taxation of any income under \$30,000. [Past welfare recipient]*

## 4 Māori and the welfare system

Māori accounted for more than a fifth of all respondents. For the most part, the issues they raised, such as benefit levels being insufficient to live on, were similar to those of non-Māori.

*The current welfare system is inadequate and children and whānau are missing out on necessary things such as food and power. Sacrifices are being made, and this is impacting on our children. Hungry children cannot learn at school, and these children are the most at risk of future negative outcomes. Whānau are stressed and becoming overwhelmed. [Past welfare recipient, Māori ]*

Distinctly Māori perspectives were most strongly represented around the lack of alignment of the current welfare system with Māori values and culture.

### 4.1 Underlying causes of welfare dependency

A strong theme was the impact of colonisation, which continues to adversely affect many Māori. These include, but are not limited to, loss of lands, autonomy and influence, livelihood, culture, language, social connectedness and self-esteem, as well as unequal access to education, and other resources and opportunities, and the effects of discrimination. Some felt that engagement with the welfare system was a modern manifestation of the on-going process of colonisation, which continues to further disempower many Māori and increase inequity.

*I believe we need to openly discuss racism, colonialism, sexism and the effects of disability and learn from each other so as not to increase and perpetuate inequality. [Retiree, non-Māori]*

It was suggested that priority needed to be given to addressing the underlying causes of welfare dependency, alongside improving how the system works for Māori, if the inter-generational welfare dependency experienced by some Māori is to be addressed. Acceptance of inequitable outcomes as the norm was seen as unhelpful.

*Stop running the economy as if 4–6 percent unemployment – but 20 percent for young people, Māori and PI – is normal. [Past welfare recipient]*

Several respondents emphasised the need to invest in building community, and community resilience, in order for individuals, whānau, hapū and iwi to thrive.

## 4.2 The welfare system is not well-aligned with Māori values

Many Māori and non-Māori remarked that the system is a largely Pākehā institution.

*Acknowledgement of Māori as tangata whenua of Aotearoa. The system needs be changed from a British system to a system that works for Māori. [NGO employee]*

Many observed that Māori values are not well-reflected in the design and delivery of the welfare system and considered this to be a breach of the Crown's Treaty obligations.

*There is an absolute disregard for Te Tiriti o Waitangi in WINZ processes and practices. [Employer, non-Māori]*

*Te Tiriti o Waitangi should be at the heart of the welfare system to ensure appropriate cultural engagement with Māori. [NGO employee]*

While Māori values are expressed in strategic documents and whakataukī, these were not seen to translate well into practice.

*In the future, we hope that Work and Income will encompass the values of awahi (empathy), kotahitanga (unity), manaakitanga (kindness), whakawhanaungatanga (relationships and relating well to others) and whakamana te tangata (empowerment) so to make New Zealand a kinder place to live for all. [Manaaki Ora Trust]*

Respondent comments on the Māori values that should underpin the welfare system were outlined in Section 3 above.

## 4.3 The welfare system is not working well for Māori

### Discrimination

A very small number of respondents commented that they felt Māori and Pacific People got preferential treatment through Work and Income.

*I have heard many complaints from Pākehā that they are treated badly and differently to Māori and Pacific People. Treat everyone equally and consistently. [Jobseeker]*

On the whole though, most respondents did not consider the welfare system to be working well for Māori. Many respondents expressed concern about perceived discrimination against Māori, Pacific People, people with disabilities, women, LGBTQI and those needing welfare support in general. The following is a sample of respondent comments specific to Māori:

- *Most WINZ officers are racist towards Māori.*
- *There is discrimination towards women – and Māori women in particular.*
- *There is institutional racism and higher levels of mistrust and suspicion towards certain groups of people.*
- *Institutional racism is alive and occurring everyday.*
- *Work and Income is racist when dealing with tangata whenua or PI – anyone who isn't white.*
- *The punitive approach to beneficiaries is because of institutional racism and bias towards solo parents.*

## Lack of cultural responsiveness

Lack of cultural responsiveness is perceived as discouraging some people from seeking support despite dire need and making the experience of engaging with the system painful.

*A lot of things haven't worked for a very long time for our whānau. The system is currently broken. We have case managers who are absolutely judgmental as soon as whānau walk through the doors. [Past welfare recipient, Māori/Pacific]*

*Engagement with whānau is not mana-enhancing. There's an unwillingness to awhi whānau who don't have any knowledge of what their "entitlements" are ... Acknowledge clientele/whānau come with solutions as well as issues. Acknowledge that most whānau do not intentionally place themselves in vulnerable situations, so don't keep them vulnerable in their engagement with your services. Treat them as though they were your own whānau. [Past welfare recipient, Māori]*

Some observed that engaging with the system was harmful to Māori.

*The welfare system is belittling of the mana and integrity of our people – kuia/kaumātua, matua, tamariki mokopuna. [Provider forum, Kaitaia]*

## Need for culturally competent staff

Many people expressed concern with the lack of culturally responsive services from Work and Income and suggested training and recruitment as ways to strengthen an effective approach.

*We need to recognise Te Ao Māori, but the way it's done in the Ministry (MSD) is poor. The way they do things and what they call them is a problem. We label things with Māori terms (for example, manaakitanga) but not everyone knows what they mean. It's important to explain what the concepts mean. There are very few opportunities for Māori staff to increase their knowledge and even less for non-Māori. [MSD employee]*

*Interactions with clients of Work and Income must be culturally appropriate. Many case managers demonstrate a lack of understanding of Māori and Pacific cultures. Training around culturally appropriate interactions is essential. For instance, allowing whānau members to be present during an appointment and including whānau when making important decisions regarding a client. We recommend ongoing consultation and partnership with local iwi and hapū to ensure delivery is culturally correct. This partnership will also be beneficial as referrals to iwi-led, community programmes will increase. We encourage that all documents are available in te reo and English. Ideally, clients will also have the choice of an English or te reo speaking case manager. [Manaaki Ora Trust]*

*Have kaiāwhina placed in WINZ, CYPS, HNZ etc to help whānau navigate that service and leave with informed choices. [NGO employee]*

While all staff need to be culturally competent, it was also noted that tupuna (ancestry/heritage, relationships, local history) knowledge is desirable and cannot be taught. Employing local staff who bring the knowledge with them was recommended.

*Wānanga-run programmes would be a good start. Put them in an environment that reignites whanaungatanga with a strong emphasis on securing the values that will underpin the entire system overall. I runga te Tika te Pono me te Aroha. Our very own late Matua Pā Tate said: "Tika and Pono were violated during the negotiations of Te Tiriti, thus, Aroha fled." (kia tau Pāpā) [Welfare recipient]*

Some submitters noted that many Work and Income staff want to work in more culturally responsive ways but are restrained by the system, which does not lend itself to cultural responsiveness.

*We don't get given the time to "care". Conversations are so limited. Get them in, get them out – we don't have time to do what we know we should. [Work and Income staff forum]*

### **Practices, processes and systems aren't aligned with Māori culture**

Limited literacy and fluency in English and limited access to technology can make using online services difficult for some people. In the case of Māori, this may be compounded by cultural practices that emphasise the importance of relationships and a preference for kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) engagement.

The welfare system is perceived to be highly individualistic and focused strongly on lack of income as the core problem and paid work as the solution. This leads to a system that is not responsive to other roles and responsibilities that are also important, such as caring for whānau.

*Welfare stops people going home to the rohe, their home land, to look after their elderly. If they do, their benefit will stop. We want to go to these places and not have the benefit stopped. Even if there isn't paid work, there is work – and community to develop. [Whangarei community forum]*

Not supporting additional children in a family, which is intended to discourage people from having large families they can't support, does not recognise much less value-natural whāngai support systems where tamariki may be cared for by whānau.

Whānau decisions are usually driven by consideration of the best interests of the child and may include protecting them from the impacts of drug and alcohol use, family violence, abuse or parenting compromised through ill health including mental illness. Such placements often provide for community supervision, maintaining connection, and for reunification with parents – functions that would otherwise fall to Oranga Tamariki and be resource intensive. Rigid adherence to rules without placing the needs of children at the centre, considering the bigger picture and taking a holistic approach to understanding whānau strengths and needs is seen as a significant system failure.

Policies on relocation are not sensitive to Māori culture. Families struggling in large cities may return to their rohe to live more economically and benefit from the social support available. However, these benefits are eroded by stand-down policies and have flow-on impacts on whānau who may be struggling themselves.

*On returning home, they have a stand-down period of thirty–sixty days before they are entitled to anything. Extended whānau who are already pōhara usually support them at great cost to their own whānau. WINZ is usually not supportive in these circumstances, not even an emergency benefit. These whānau have tamariki as well. And the tamariki go through trauma. At one stage, we had three whānau return home. They had nowhere to stay and had eleven tamariki between them. We had to put them into our marae until they found accommodation. Our marae were not built for homelessness, but we had no option. [Kuia]*

## 4.4 Suggested improvements to the welfare system

In addition to those already listed above, respondents identified a number of potential improvements to the welfare system.

### Partnering with iwi and kaupapa Māori services

In addition to consulting with iwi and hapū on culturally appropriate service delivery, partnership with iwi and kaupapa Māori services was raised as a positive option for better meeting the needs of many Māori.

*Why aren't we taking our services onto marae? It's our services under our terms (that is, MSD dictates the terms). [MSD employee]*

*If the current system is not working, and it's not working, then hand it over to us and we will sort it out. [Kaitiaia community hui]*

*Work with social service providers and get them to set up welfare through their services. Māori specific, Pacific specific social service providers to deal with their welfare. Not a one-size-fits-all approach. MSD don't have to provide the service in-house for everyone! [Government employee, not MSD]*

*Suggest WINZ's service (staff) have MDT team which meets on a regular basis with community (at marae, at health services, at schools, kohanga reo). [Individual, Māori]*

Whānau Ora was identified by many respondents as a model that works for many Māori.

*WINZ to have their own Whānau Ora Navigators that support and guide the Whānau through the plans that they create, that encourages tino rangatiratanga! [Past welfare recipient, Māori]*

*The Whānau Ora approach is an example of kaupapa Māori approaches to delivering support that are based in the network of wider Whānau connections. Modern social security legislation and policy must provide for alternative approaches to achieving the aims of social welfare that better reflect Māori aspiration for full citizenship and rangatiratanga. [NZ Council of Christian Social Services]*

It was suggested that the welfare system could adopt a more Whānau Ora like approach or partner with Whānau Ora providers to work with Māori whānau in need of welfare support on Work and Income's behalf, and work with them in a more holistic and integrated way that engages whānau and hapū rather than focusing on the individual or family unit comprising only parents and their own children. Some non-Māori also appreciate the Whānau Ora approach.

*I have in the last three months changed medical practice to a new outfit who are based on the Māori way of doing things (Whānau Ora). They are brilliant. Not only GP and nurse but WINZ and social workers based in one hub. I went to see the GP, and she was able to refer to a practice nurse then social worker and am now accessing counselling and hope to see WINZ lady to ask about part-time job opportunities when I feel mentally in a better space. I live in a very small rural village, don't have a car, and there is no bus service unless you can walk the 3 kilometres to the main road. Having all services in one hub makes it so, so much easier. Plus they have hired staff who are very approachable and care. I am not Māori, but this system has been so much better to access. So much better. It's a model all New Zealander's should be able to access in time. [Jobseeker]*

## **Strengths-based approaches**

Respondents suggested that strengths-based responses informed by Te Ao Māori would look very different from the current service and would be much more acceptable to Māori – and be more effective.

*WINZ resources could be given to the community to deliver, for whānau wellbeing. Currently people have to grovel at WINZ. Instead use Maramataka and so on to learn life skills, sustenance, gardening, living in harmony with the seasons.*  
[Kaitia provider forum]

*No more money for WINZ. Just give the money to community groups so we can create programmes for whānau that work for us and belong to us.*  
[Kaitia community hui]

*[We need] wrap-around services that truly enable. Education programmes that inspire to aspire! Self-empowerment programmes. The kind that wear and teach Tika Pono and aroha. Strengthen people by revealing their true potential.* [Welfare recipient, Māori]

## **Devolving responsibility and resources to local communities**

It was felt by some that communities had worked effectively to help their members survive, but that this was not always recognised, much less valued. It was suggested that devolving responsibility and resources to local communities would enable them to help whānau thrive rather than just survive.

*No more WINZ, just give the money to community groups so they can create programmes for whānau that work for us and belong to us ... Give the power back to those who have the solutions.* [Kaitia provider forum]

Some saw this not just as an opportunity to do better but as a way of upholding tino rangitiratanga. It was recognised that in some instances support would need to be provided while communities built their capability.

# 5 Engagement with Work and Income

## 5.1 Culture

A large number of respondents commented on the level of assistance and service being received when people engage with or attempt to engage with Work and Income. Many respondents commented on the culture within Work and Income.

Some recipients reported their interactions with staff at Work and Income had been positive. Others reported favourably on what they regarded as an apparent change in culture in Work and Income more recently, with a change in staff attitudes to being more friendly and empathetic. Some recognised that staff are trying their best in a challenging environment.

*Case managers are working more in partnership with beneficiaries.* [NGO employee]

*I have been impressed at times with the commitment of some of the staff towards supporting those who are needing financial support through the welfare system.*  
[Past welfare recipient]

But the majority of respondents had a far less favourable experience at Work and Income and felt they were not treated with dignity or respect and that staff were not generally showing compassion and empathy for those who needed assistance.

*They can be rather rude and arrogant and have a sense of "I'm better than you" and treat you like a number and not a person.* [Welfare recipient]

*The system and staff often demonstrate punitive attitudes and actions – lack of compassion and empathy.* [Friend/family member of welfare recipient]

*It seems that once a person becomes a beneficiary, their right to privacy and respect is severely diminished. They almost become a non-person in the eyes of MSD.* [Welfare recipient]

*I should think that very few people want to be on a benefit, and even fewer as a result of any misdeed, so why should we be treated as if we are at fault because we are in this situation?* [Welfare recipient]

Many respondents expressed feeling intimidated, humiliated or discouraged by their interaction with Work and Income or found it stressful going into a Work and Income office, and so they avoided interacting with Work and Income where they could. Some commented there are case managers and other Work and Income staff who give the impression they are paying welfare recipients out of their own salary.

*They are like a dragon sitting atop their treasure – guarding their hoard.*  
[Nelson Community forum]

*System operates from a distrust position.* [Wellington service provider meeting]

*In my experience of working alongside a number of people who are welfare recipients, I would say that the experience of going to WINZ is quite an ordeal for people. They feel like they are treated as "criminals", like they are guilty until proven innocent, and there is no openness to describing their situation and explaining the issues inherent in their position.* [Friend or family member of welfare recipient]

*Even for well-educated, knowledgeable people, the dealings with Work and Income can be demeaning and distressing. For people with less knowledge it is so much worse.* [Welfare recipient]

*It seems like they feel the money is their own money and they have contempt for the people who are accessing support. [Welfare recipient]*

Many people noticed the difference in treatment in Service Centres towards people who were there regarding superannuation as opposed to other support and were disappointed and perplexed by this different level of service and treatment.

*It feels like Work and Income staff are judgmental and that you can't express how you feel or you will be kicked out. You should be treated the same, and it should not matter what you are there for. [New Plymouth Community forum]*

A significant number of respondents commented on the need for the culture of Work and Income to change.

*Work and Income need a better service culture rather than the "gatekeeper culture", which seems to prevail at the moment. [NGO employee]*

*The culture at Work and Income needs to be improved so that "consumers" of welfare can have similar expectations to health consumers of being treated with respect, receiving the information reasonably expected etc. [Individual respondent]*

Suggestions for improvement included a less judgmental attitude on the part of Work and Income staff and a more empathetic and compassionate approach towards welfare recipients that takes into account individual circumstances.

*People are different, circumstances are different – people need to be assessed individually. [Nelson community forum]*

*Treat people with respect and compassion and understanding for their individual circumstances. [Individual respondent]*

*An attitudinal change is required, such that it is acknowledged that our society disadvantages some people and does not allow everyone to achieve a good standard of living, through no fault of their own. [NGO employee]*

*The workers need to treat their customers like they would like to be treated and listen not judge. We are all human and all have problems. [Friend/family member of welfare recipient]*

Many respondents felt that Work and Income staff needed to have training in people and communication skills so they could be more welcoming and be able to communicate with respect and know how to treat people with empathy and compassion.

*I think staff training needs to include talking to people with sympathy, if they are unable to empathise, and ensure that the language and tone used by staff is respectful. [Welfare recipient]*

*MSD staff could have further training in responding to people's circumstances with empathy, and developing a greater degree of understanding about how hard their clients' lives actually are. [Anglican Care South Canterbury]*

*Often those on a benefit are at the LOWEST point in their lives, and they need encouragement and acceptance from Work and Income case managers. They don't need to be pulled lower but need to be pushed higher and supported generously. I think case managers should go through more training on social services and how to relate to people that are dysfunctional and need their help. Compassion! Support your clients with compassion. [Past welfare recipient]*

A large number of respondents suggested that Work and Income case managers needed better training, or retraining, to ensure they engaged appropriately with welfare recipients. There were numerous references to the need for staff to understand the challenges of people with mental illness, medical conditions, disabilities or other special needs. There were strong calls for these to be specialist roles.

*Staff are not qualified to work with vulnerable people. [Palmerston North community forum]*

*Staff need to be trained and empathetic to people with disabilities. [Newtown (Wellington) community centre]*

*Special training for staff who look after clients on the Supported Living Payment, so they can better understand health, disability and accessibility needs and issues. [Welfare recipient]*

*Work and Income frontline staff could be up-skilled in how to deal with clients with mental health issues and/or are from a non-English speaking background. [Past welfare recipient]*

*At point of contact, that is, with case managers, there are major concerns about service delivery in relation to clients with mental health issues. This can vary with individual case managers but is part of a systemic culture that seeks to sidestep, and avoid acknowledging, clients potential difficulties and barriers to employment. [Welfare recipient]*

Many respondents referred to the need for staff training in assisting those who have suffered trauma such as having left an abusive relationship.

More staff training was seen as important in the area of culturally appropriate interactions. Training in counselling skills was also mentioned.

*MSD is having to try and cope with a growing number of complex cases and consider a wide range of issues and problems for clients. It is no longer about only financial support and employment. We are increasingly having to try and manage housing needs, homelessness, mental health and addictions, but have very little formal or meaningful on-going training for this. [MSD employee]*

## 5.2 Accountability

There was a common call for accountability structures and key performance measures that needed to be in place to assess the performance of Work and Income.

Some thought that the focus should be on the quality of service provided by Work and Income staff and suggested performance measures based on the satisfaction levels of welfare recipients, and that these need to be monitored and reported on a regular basis.

*The satisfaction level of beneficiaries as users of Work and Income should be regularly measured and reported for each branch and would also be a more useful KPI for case managers to meet. [Unite Union]*

*It is also important to have the means of assessing staff performance and provide beneficiaries with a means of providing feedback that will not have a negative impact or future consequences for them. [Welfare recipient]*

Some wanted to see the removal of performance measures based on quantity of outputs or meeting targets.

*The culture within Work and Income needs to change. There needs to be a focus on manaaki and aroha to all involved in the system. Not process and meeting targets at the cost of people. [Past welfare recipient]*

*The abolition of unhelpful performance measures that focus on quantity of outputs rather than the quality of service. [PSA]*

Other suggestions for assessing Work and Income performance included a performance model based on the promotion and protection of the wellbeing of families and whānau and children's rights and wellbeing; and performance measures relating to the take-up of entitlements.

A few respondents commented on the complaints process and considered that complaints needed to be dealt with fairly and promptly.

## 5.3 Reviews and appeals

Some respondents commented on the current appeal mechanisms such as the Benefits Review Committee and the Medical Appeals Board, which hear appeals against decisions of the Ministry of Social Development about social welfare payments.

Concerns were around the belief that these bodies are not sufficiently independent. Ministry employees comprise the majority of the Benefits Review Committee. Both committees are administered by the Ministry, which raised issues about transparency and natural justice for respondents.

Other issues raised were that the decision-making power between the initial review bodies is inconsistent and the timeframes for lodging a further appeal varies. Respondents also mentioned the delays in receiving decisions from reviews and appeals, which can create uncertainty and hardship for welfare recipients.

Some respondents commented that the composition of the Medical Appeals Board often comprises general practitioners, whom they considered did not always have the appropriate expertise for the areas being looked at.

Suggestions for improvement focused on the need for an independent review process, the provision of legal aid to welfare recipients to enable them to engage in the review process and the importance of timely decisions.

*Review process for disputed decisions is inadequate for beneficiaries and takes too long. [Wellington Roundtable]*

*Establish an independent review process regarding Work and Income practices, sanctions and entitlements for beneficiaries and low-income families and provide beneficiaries with legal aid so that a lawyer can assist them in preparing their cases. Currently appeals to the Benefits Review Committee and the Social Security Appeals Authority are largely internal processes while appeals to higher courts require resources that most do not have. [Child Poverty Action Group]*

*Better processes for reviews and appeals are also needed – more changes are needed to ensure the Benefit Review Committee has genuinely independent membership, follows principles of natural justice such as right to representation and makes its decisions in a timely way. [New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services]*

## 5.4 Case management

Many respondents commented on the importance of effective case management in the welfare system.

Some respondents reported a positive experience in their interaction with case managers.

*I am happy with most of the case managers I have dealt with and acknowledge it is a stressful job. [Welfare recipient]*

*I have had a few empathetic kind and understanding case managers, which made all the difference to how I felt. I felt valued and cared about. [Welfare recipient]*

Some respondents considered that Work and Income staff are under resourced for their workload and there are insufficient frontline and service centre staff to deal with the demands and the complexity of welfare recipients' situations. Some acknowledged the constraints that Work and Income may be operating under. This was consistent with the views expressed by staff at Work and Income who attended the staff consultation meetings. The lack of resources to manage increasing workloads, the increasingly reactive focus and the inability to do the proactive work required to deal with the complex needs of welfare recipients were mentioned by staff.

*Case managers are often very helpful but constrained from providing more support by the punitive parameters they are forced to work within. [Welfare recipient]*

Others felt that the case management role needed considerable strengthening. The view was expressed that case management had deteriorated in recent years with the shift for more people to see whichever case manager is available at the time.

Some respondents commented that the shift for clients to see a different case manager each time they visit can make it harder to build trust and rapport and can result in people having to repeat their needs and individual circumstances to different case managers each time they contact Work and Income. This can also use up valuable meeting time, which is already too short. It was noted that this can be particularly difficult or stressful for vulnerable people such as those with mental health issues.

*Different case manager all the time. I need someone who is the same, so they get to know me and I them. [Welfare recipient]*

Some respondents noted there are no longer specialist case managers for welfare recipients with disabilities or illness and considered that continuity of care and support by a staff member who knows the welfare recipient is important.

*Seeing a different person each time is really difficult. Not only do they don't know your situation but I get different answers from different people about the same issue. This is extremely frustrating and discourages me from having contact with Work and Income ... As someone who lives with a long-term health issue, it would make a big difference if I had a single case manager. [Welfare recipient]*

*Dedicated case managers for very vulnerable people are needed, especially those with mental health problems. [Invercargill community forum]*

Some respondents felt that welfare recipients are reliant on the knowledge of the case manager they are assigned to on the day. Many commented on the inconsistent treatment welfare recipients receive – between case managers and between service centres.

*Inconsistent advice and application of policy.* [Lower Hutt community forum]

*Inconsistent messages from case managers.* [Palmerston North youth forum]

*Most people still find dealing with Work and Income stressful. Different people receive different assistance according to who they talk to and what they are aware of and whether they ask the RIGHT questions.* [NGO employee]

*The system seems very fragmented and difficult to navigate, knowing what support is available and how to access support is not always clear. Inconsistency is created by varying interpretations of the rules/guidelines, individual discretion and locality. This creates a lot of uncertainty for people.* [Friend/family member of welfare recipient]

A few respondents commented on the need for Work and Income to be culturally appropriate in its interactions with welfare recipients and considered that many case managers showed a lack of understanding of Māori and Pacific cultures and of the cultures of recent immigrants.

There was agreement among many respondents that there needed to be more case managers.

*More staff to support those with disability and to reduce anxiety to get work.* [Whangarei Community forum]

*We could hire more case managers so that people don't have to wait and so that when they are seen, the person seeing them is not under time pressure to get them out the door.* [Welfare recipient]

*Case management – clients don't have to explain their situation to many case managers. More staff is essential.* [MSD employee]

Many people also felt that everyone should have a designated case manager who understood their unique circumstances and could take a strengths-based, goal-oriented approach to supporting the welfare recipient to become as independent as possible. Motivation and coaching were also identified as important functions.

*Designated case workers rather than random person and reading notes.* [Whangarei Community forum]

*Assigning a case manager to each beneficiary when they first enter the system whose role it is to help them reach their full potential by helping them plan for the future – to develop their capabilities and to remove barriers to achieving this. The beneficiary should stay with the case manager unless it is impractical.* [Welfare recipient]

*I think that an individual should have a case manager that they get to know and they can come up with individual goal plans to try and support an individual to independence.* [NGO employee]

*Having case managers at Work and Income who are that person's for their entire journey at Work and Income, not as it is currently with most people in the general pool seeing the next available case manager.* [MSD employee]

Some respondents suggested that more case managers are needed who have social work qualifications or there needs to be dedicated social workers so they can deal with the multiple needs and complex circumstances clients often experience and who need to be seen in the context of their family, whānau and communities. Several respondents felt this function needed to be independent from decision making around benefit entitlements.

*I would also strongly suggest having qualified, registered social workers in there. Social workers given more say as opposed to a case manager. Having the aforementioned staff tackling vulnerable people certainly frees up case managers, who seem to be doing these roles as well. [Current welfare recipient]*

*More social workers screening and working with people to make sustainable lifestyle changes is required at Work and Income not just work programmes. [Past welfare recipient]*

## 5.5 Access to the welfare system

Many respondents commented that the process of applying for a benefit is difficult to navigate and overly complicated, including the complexity of online and paper based forms and the difficulties faced in filling them out. The comment was made that most people will be applying at a time of high stress, and trying to complete all the forms and do all the paperwork required is very challenging.

*We have an incredibly complex benefit system... It forces people to be active navigators of the welfare system when they are poorly equipped to do so. [Wellington Roundtable]*

*The change to internet-based form filling impacts on so many people who do not have access to internet or do not have the ability to go through the ridiculous forms. I tried to help a young sixteen-year-old to complete the independent youth benefit form, and I was shocked at how long and difficult it was. [Past welfare recipient]*

*The system is so complex that mistakes and omissions can occur even if the staff are doing their best to help. [Welfare recipient]*

It was noted that the system is very hard to navigate for many people with mental health problems, intellectual disabilities, sensory impairments or where English is not their first language.

Some respondents felt that there are too many conditions and requirements, too much "red tape" and too many hoops to jump through to receive assistance.

*People needing to access financial support are not always treated well; they are often viewed in a negative light, are treated with disdain and must jump through a number of hoops to receive even a basic payment or income support. [NGO employee]*

Many felt that the Work and Income website needed to be more user-friendly and online forms made simpler. Some respondents suggested streamlining the processes and reducing the amount of paperwork required.

*It [online completion of application for Jobseeker with medical exemption] is very long-winded and hard to complete in one go. Short sections with a list of what they cover/what you'll need to complete ... would be a big improvement. [Welfare recipient]*

Suggestions were made for all documents to have a read-aloud version, a simplified version for the learning disabled, large print versions for those with visual impairments and signed video material for New Zealand Sign Language users.

Suggestions were made for how the system could be improved for the handling of documentation and to simplify the information required. These included:

- Streamlining the main benefit applications down to a more manageable level
- Having more forms handled electronically
- Placing drop boxes for forms in Work and Income offices
- Allowing more enquiries to be answered online and over the phone
- Providing more practical support for filling out application forms.

## 5.6 Timeliness

Some respondents suggested that administration processes needed to be efficient and transparent and commented that timely decisions are essential to ensure people have support when they need it, bearing in mind that people are often at crisis point when they come to Work and Income.

It was considered by several respondents that there are long delays in processing applications, even for urgent assistance, which they felt should be dealt with as soon as possible. Some said that their applications had been lost and therefore payments had been delayed.

*People waiting for benefits to be granted, online applications were supposed to make it faster but now as staff in offices have been reduced, it is taking up to four weeks for a benefit to be granted when it should be granted from online application, and appointment for work obligations could be sorted once appointment is available. [NGO employee]*

Some suggested that Work and Income offices should be open beyond the standard work hours.

*Emergencies don't just happen between 9 and 5, Monday to Friday. [Greymouth Community Forum]*

However, there were several respondents who reported favourably on the timeliness of payments.

*Payment processing is very reliable (haven't heard of anyone being paid late). [Welfare recipient]*

## 5.7 Access to information

A significant number of respondents commented on the information that people are given by Work and Income on the assistance and support they are entitled to through the welfare system.

Many respondents felt that people are not always aware of their full entitlements when they apply for a benefit and are often not told by Work and Income staff about all the entitlements they are eligible for. There was general agreement that people needed good advice about all the entitlements and assistance available to them. Some felt there is currently no transparency for clients and no access to the information that Work and Income use to assess entitlements.

*MSD should make all entitlements known.* [Kaitaia Community forum]

*Work and Income doesn't volunteer entitlements. You have to know for yourself to ask.* [Palmerston North Community Forum]

*I think the current welfare system only works well when people are aware of their rights. If people are not aware of their rights, the welfare system is punitive, heavy handed and actively endeavours to ensure that those deserving of welfare are not fully informed of their entitlements.* [Past welfare recipient]

*Accessibility to full entitlements – people need to actively seek additional help/grants from WINZ rather than full assistance being offered as of right.* [Individual respondent]

*Case managers need to provide full information to MSD "clients" about any possible entitlements that could help them. The case managers need to offer this, not wait to be asked.* [Past welfare recipient]

The issue of providing complete information regarding all entitlements had particular significance among Pacific People and is related to what some called the "migrant dream". Pacific respondents wanted to make clear that they will not ask or demand what they are entitled to, and this is often because of feelings of shame or embarrassment that they need help to provide for themselves and their families.

Some respondents commented that people who have an advocate or social worker attend a Work and Income appointment with them are more likely to receive a positive response and be able to access their full entitlements. It was noted that this can have the effect of disempowering people from being able to advocate for themselves.

*Regular and consistent treatment by MSD. Not just those with advocates.* [Invercargill community forum]

*The fact that they don't get entitlements unless someone is advocating for them.* [Wellington City Mission]

The quality and accuracy of information from MSD was often raised, with reports that people receive inconsistent information about entitlements from Work and Income staff. Some said that advice often differs between call centres and staff in local offices. It was commented that inconsistency is being created between different Work and Income offices by varying interpretations of the legislation and guidelines.

*There are huge inconsistencies in what you are told from different offices, the 0800 number and the website.* [Welfare recipient]

*I have often been to WINZ appointments with people on a benefit. The beneficiaries usually get terribly stressed for a week or so before the planned appointment. It shouldn't be a stressful experience. Some staff are wonderful and know what the beneficiaries are entitled to, the next WINZ staff member that the beneficiary may see, may tell them something entirely different – it is very confusing and feels like a roller coaster ride. [Friend/family member of welfare recipient]*

*The second main area of concern is the conditional nature of support and difficulty obtaining it. This includes the many and onerous obligations of recipients, the complexity of requirements, the lengthy waits and difficulty in communication, the frequent threat of withdrawal of support and frequently unhelpful or frankly demeaning attitude of staff. [NGO employee]*

Many people felt there needed to be a greater emphasis placed on ensuring that welfare recipients are receiving their full entitlements and are receiving support and assistance towards helping them towards long-term independence.

*An entitlement should be freely given. MSD staff should be trying to maximise people's benefit to enhance their quality of life and the wellbeing of all citizens and residents. [NGO employee]*

It was felt by some respondents that certain groups needed additional support to ensure they were receiving their full entitlements, such as those with mental health conditions and health and disability issues. A few respondents noted the need for additional support for people just released from prison.

*Co-ordination when people are released from jail, a mentor or system to help them access their benefits. Some people have no experience with a cellphone since being incarcerated. [Friend or family member of a welfare recipient]*

Some respondents expressed concern that there were not adequate measures put in place for people who have been trespassed from a Work and Income office to ensure they can still access support from the welfare system. Suggestions for support included access to social workers and advocacy services.

Some respondents considered that most Work and Income staff don't have a good understanding of the entitlements and assistance available in the welfare system. It was felt most would benefit from more training on the relevant legislation, guidelines and the range of entitlements.

*Better training for staff including a person's rights, entitlements, respect. [Welfare recipient]*

Some respondents were of the view that the information being made available by Work and Income and the language used within the system is not easy to understand for people with English as a second language or for some people with disabilities. It was noted that there is not an easy-to-read New Zealand Sign Language or even basic New Zealand Sign Language version of most resources.

*Simplify the language/system to make it easier for applicants/recipients to understand. [Past welfare recipient]*

The view was strongly expressed that there needed to be full disclosure of what is available within the welfare system in te reo and New Zealand Sign Language (New Zealand's official languages) and other languages reflecting New Zealand's increasing ethnic diversity.

## 5.8 Advocacy

Ensuring that people are comfortable engaging with Work and Income and can access and understand information about their rights and entitlements, and access all the support they are entitled to, was seen as a key function that should be widely available. It was considered that there was a need for advocates to fulfil this function.

*Not enough access to advocates – have them more visible and more available.*  
[Rotorua Community Forum]

*I have to have an appointment with a case manager to talk about my medical. I feel unsure and worried like I'm going to be interrogated about if I'm really sick or not. If the mentality and level of care was better at WINZ, then I wouldn't feel so anxious and scared all the time when I think about having to deal with them. So things like that would help with supporting the client's feelings and easing the already stressful situation most of us are in. I think there should be a list of advocates available for clients who feel unable to come alone and feel intimidated.* [Welfare recipient]

Some felt that independent advocates based at Work and income offices could provide this support, although some noted they wouldn't be so necessary in a well-functioning system.

*People should have an advocate/support person available for them and allocated to them if they do not bring someone with them when they visit WINZ. This should be a specific role and not cross over with a role that makes decisions on what resources are allocated to that person. They should be available to support, advocate and debrief. The experience of going to WINZ can be a very difficult and overwhelming one, and I believe that this would help on all fronts.* [NGO employee]

## 5.9 Referral and co-ordination/connecting with other services

Co-ordination of access to support services provided by other agencies and the community was seen as important. The view was expressed that there needed to be good co-ordination and referral systems between the government agencies providing health, education and housing assistance to ensure that an individual or a family's needs are addressed, supported and followed up where necessary. Some respondents expressed support for referrals to community-based organisations to increase wrap-around support.

There was support from some respondents for a system where people could access most of what they needed through one provider.

Many people wanted to see stronger linkages to other government and community agencies. Suggestions to achieve this included the use of information hubs, wellbeing advisors/navigators and wrap-around services.

*Want a single integrated service – enough of silos.* [Lower Hutt community forum]

*Establishing community hubs that sit social workers/primary health, education and training and welfare co-ordinators in the same place so people can access support from a multidisciplinary team as required.* [Past welfare recipient]

*Combine Citizens Advice Bureau with Work and Income offices, so clients don't have to go looking for JPs across the city/town to verify docs. One stop shop for welfare assistance!* [Past welfare recipient]

## 5.10 Access online

Many respondents commented on accessing Work and Income assistance and support either online or by phone. The range of contact channels available to interact with Work and Income was noted such as MyMSD, call centres, face-to-face meetings and phone appointments.

Some respondents commented favourably on the increasing ability to be able to apply online for access to welfare services, as this meant there was less need to go into a Work and Income office. Some respondents expressed the view that MyMSD works well for those who know how to engage with the system, the internet and online devices.

However, many expressed distress at this seeming push to online services and MSD's perceived lack of awareness of the difficulty this created for many people. It was noted that the system does not work so well or can be very difficult for those who are not computer literate, can't afford the internet or devices such as computers or smart phones or live in remote areas without internet access. Some respondents commented that some people with disabilities struggled to access the system.

*Good to have MyMSD online to keep up with my case and benefit.  
[Welfare recipient]*

*I do like the MyMSD page. I think it's really handy and takes some anxiety out of having to ring the call centre. [Welfare recipient]*

*The ability to connect with MSD through technology as in email, access of account and topping up of blue cards has vastly improved. However, it can be discriminating for those without access to the internet or even a phone or computer. [Retiree]*

*I don't have internet access at home, so I drive one hour to my parents to log-on to MSD. When I get there, I have forgotten my password, so they send me a new password to my phone, but I can't get phone service at my parents' ... they have no idea how rural communities operate. [Retiree]*

Some respondents noted that the increasing expectation for people to make their applications online using MyMSD was reducing the opportunity for face-to-face contact and this contributed to a lack of personal engagement with people. Some felt there needed to be less technology and more face-to-face help, particularly for those with complex situations, disabilities, language difficulties or low literacy levels.

*While online dealings are very helpful for lots of people, there needs to be recognition that for many reasons (for example, language difficulties, literacy levels, cultural differences, age, health issues), it would be good to have more opportunity for a face-to-face encounter. [Individual respondent]*

*MSD staff forget that there are many who lack the necessary literacy and language skills to complete the required documentation. Many in need lack bank accounts, residential address and the required number of acceptable forms of identification necessary before they are eligible to receive benefits and support. [An employer]*

*The online processes make it hard/and or impossible for our most deprived to access the support they need. [NGO employee]*

A group of respondents considered that more practical support is needed to use MyMSD and that welfare recipients need help to understand the application system and how to access supports. There were suggestions made as to how MyMSD could be improved such as having more information and documents on the MyMSD system.

## 5.11 Access by phone

Several respondents commented on the difficulty of contacting Work and Income by phone and the long wait times experienced.

Some respondents reported that call centre staff were unable to complete information requests or provide the information they were looking for. Others expressed frustration at needing to repeat the details of their personal situation each time they phoned.

*The 0800 number means that you have to tell your story every single time you ring. It would be good to be able to talk directly to a case manager when you have complex cases. [NGO employee]*

Some respondents said they were receiving inconsistent advice from call centre staff and that staff could be unhelpful and uncaring on the 0800 number. They suggested that improved communication between Work and Income service and call-centre staff was needed to improve consistency of advice.

*Lack of consistency between call centre and the site. Information is processed differently between different people. [Wesley Community Action Group]*

*Too many times I have been told one thing by the call centre only to get a totally different answer when I attend my appointment. [Welfare recipient]*

*More friendly and kinder staff on the 0800 number. Please remember we cannot see the person and they are unable to see us, so they do not know how upset we are. [Welfare recipient]*

## 5.12 Access face-to-face

Many respondents commented on the difficulty of obtaining an appointment and the lack of appointment availability. Many people considered that Work and Income staff had no recognition of the costs involved in getting to an appointment and the impact this had on budgets. Both staff and welfare recipients said that appointment times are far too short, with not enough time to fully discuss and understand people's situations.

Many respondents felt that appointment wait times (which can be two to three weeks) are too long, especially in emergency situations.

*The appointments system really needs looking at. Presently there can be a wait of up to two weeks to see your case manager and sometimes longer. That's appalling. [Past welfare recipient]*

Others commented on the wait times experienced in Work and Income offices. Several respondents noted that there was often a long queue to speak to the receptionist, and even when people had confirmed they were there for an appointment, there was frequently a long wait before they got to see a staff member. Many respondents expressed concern that people with disabilities, people accompanied by young children and the elderly were experiencing this.

Some respondents commented that the closure of some Work and Income offices and the reduced number of offices in the regions meant that welfare recipients were having to travel very long distances to visit an office and it was becoming more difficult for people in rural communities to access services given the lack of public transport and cost of transport.

There were many suggestions for improvements. These included:

- Having more counters operating in busy offices
- Having more staff and case managers

- Increase the time allowed per appointment
- Sending out letters in a timely manner (letters with appointment times often arrive too late.)
- Having support over the phone for people who live in rural districts so that they don't have to travel to a Work and Income office.

## 5.13 Environment

There were many comments on the environments that welfare recipients experience when entering a Work and Income office.

A few felt that the atmosphere entering a Work and Income office is now more welcoming and friendly than before and commented positively on changes such as the redesign of waiting areas, including the security guards being more friendly. However, there were others who felt the introduction of new colours and furniture was a superficial change and there had been no improvement in the level of service, which was far more important.

The overwhelming majority of respondents felt that the Work and Income offices are not welcoming or child and family friendly and commented that there was no receptionist at the desk to meet and greet clients entering the office. Some respondents mentioned that the long queues and security staff can be intimidating.

*Even though I worked for Work and Income, I don't like going into the office as I find some of the security guards very intimidating. It's a shame a small group has spoilt it for us. I understand why, but it doesn't take away the sense of being labelled. [Welfare recipient]*

The need for greater privacy when people are being interviewed was mentioned by many respondents. Some felt that holding meetings with case managers in the open-plan office can be breach of privacy with other members of the public within hearing distance and commented that it does not provide confidentiality.

*The open-plan office does not work well for all applicants; I can see it gives Work and Income staff more safety, but some clients are really upset at having to discuss their personal details in this situation. [Government employee, not MSD]*

*Having non-open-plan offices would be far more client friendly too. [Welfare recipient]*

*If you live on the West Coast, you know or are related to someone who is in the office, or someone who knows them. I don't want to talk when they can all hear. [Greymouth Community Forum]*

Many suggestions were made for improvements to Work and Income offices. These included:

- Having a receptionist at the front desk at all times
- Having accessible toilets
- Making water available
- Having more family friendly spaces
- Providing change tables for babies
- Having separate queues for those with chronic illness/disabilities
- Providing private rooms for all case workers
- Ensuring a degree of privacy is available for those wanting or needing this.

## 6 Employment, housing and other support services

Support services are seen to be as important as financial support for enabling people to become independent of the welfare system.

### 6.1 Support to gain/retain employment

A few respondents believed that Work and Income is providing good assistance in helping people to look for work. Specific measures mentioned included having access to a range of professionals to support welfare recipients into employment, work programmes for the unemployed and assistance to pay for expenses associated with starting a new job such as new clothes, safety gear and transport.

*Many of the staff are kind and diligent in understanding needs and assisting moves into suitable work when it exists. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Some good initiatives to help people get into work, for example, \$3k to work, support for people starting their own businesses. [Welfare recipient]*

*I love their in-work support line. Been there since 2016, and it could really have helped me when I unfortunately had to go back on a benefit. I didn't know about it till a month ago. It has been invaluable and makes me feel worthwhile and not a bludger. [Welfare recipient]*

However, many more respondents were of the view that the assistance and support available to enter the workforce is limited, particularly for people who have health or disability issues.

Some respondents were concerned about the way work was defined by Work and Income staff.

*I think Work and Income should be more open minded about what "work" is. Their current definition of work/employment is limiting. People don't fit into one type of mould. We don't always collect income one way. We don't always work on a time-for-pay basis. [Welfare recipient]*

*Work is important, but it needs to be meaningful, decent work. We need a definition of work that encompasses this. [Wellington Roundtable]*

Many respondents considered that people are not being given the resources or assistance to move into work that's appropriate to their experience, skills or training. The comment was made that professional employment options are not supported as well as they could be and Work and Income needs to build more networks outside of the unskilled manual labour market. There was a widespread call for putting more effort into matching people with jobs.

*Need better matching of jobs to clients. [Wellington City Mission]*

*There is a lack of understanding shown by staff and policies as to what actually constitutes "suitable work" for different people and their circumstances and situations. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Better job seeker support than there is currently – as in actual support to find a job, not just saying "Oh yeah have you tried looking on Trademe jobs? Or Seek?" [Welfare recipient]*

*Work and Income send me suggestions for job roles from time to time. Unfortunately the job roles that they send me have never, not even once, been appropriate to my skills and qualifications. Suggesting to me that I should apply for a job on a factory production line, or as a manual labourer, after I have completed multiple university degrees, suggests that Work and Income make no effort to understand who I am or what my situation is, and devalues the education I have engaged in. [Welfare recipient]*

Existing Work and Income initiatives such as the Work 4 U seminars and Jobseeker forums were not seen, by some respondents, as being particularly effective in helping people into work. Some respondents felt that work brokers needed to be more involved in helping welfare recipients to find work.

*Having to go to a Work 4 U seminar which pretty much just says look on Trademe for jobs is pointless. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Do not force people to attend work places that do not have basic facilities like clean drinking water, toilet facilities, hygienic facilities to wash hands. Work brokers should have to visit work sites to make sure facilities are adequate and capable of meeting legislative requirements. The local Work and Income manager should be able to be prosecuted when health and safety requirements are not met. [Welfare recipient]*

Many respondents noted a significant variation about what was considered suitable work and felt there needed to be a commitment to finding work appropriate to the person's individual circumstances and move away from putting people under pressure to find just any job. Factors to be considered included appropriate hours of employment, access to childcare, type of employment, skills required, experience and location of the job.

*Work/employment – needs to be tailored; not one size fits all. [Lower Hutt community forum]*

*Help finding a suitable job that suits your personal situation like not putting you on courses that are in an industry you couldn't work in due to not having childcare. [Welfare recipient]*

*It's about getting you into suitable employment, their attitude is any job is a good job, is just not true. [Welfare recipient]*

*The support given at the moment does not take into account people's profession and they expect everyone to work for a minimum wage, which is not enough to live on. They should have more job openings with living wage pays of \$20.50 an hour so people can live with dignity and without so much stress. [Welfare recipient]*

*More emphasis on finding people suitable jobs. Treating every applicant as an individual, not lumping all together and sending on pointless courses. Being realistic about the employment market now and in the future. [Welfare recipient]*

There was a view that there needed to be more support for people with health and disability issues, those currently receiving assistance through the Supported Living Payment and Jobseeker Support – Health Condition and Disability and better support for people with mental health and addiction issues to find jobs. People with language barriers were also identified as needing more support.

*Employment is a key part to helping people with mental health and addiction issues to maintain wellbeing. [Workwise]*

Some felt that young people entering the workforce are not receiving sufficient support and need more assistance. Suggestions included mentoring or career coaches for people under twenty. Some people also felt that mentors or coaches would be of benefit generally to people looking for work or to help them stay in work.

*Under-investment in employment services and youth. [West Auckland youth forum]*

*They should offer practical advice and be realistic about the job market. They've put my nineteen-year-old through the wringer. [Welfare recipient]*

*My case manager sends me some YouTube and Ted talks. It would be great to have a page that links people to good stuff like that. I know people who have been on the benefit so long that no pathway seems simple to get into work. Confidence and good employers are hard to find. [Welfare recipient]*

*We could also be focusing our collective efforts on capturing the workforce that is headed for the welfare system earlier. Potentially securing some resources to engage high school students that are challenged by the traditional education system, finding ways to get them part-time work while they finish schooling, better training and work readiness or something similar so when they leave school they can come straight in to work, instead of the welfare system being their first fall back point. [Employer]*

Sole parents were a key group considered in need of support to find work, requiring more flexible hours that fitted in with raising a family. People who wanted to start their own business were also seen as needing appropriate support.

*More support is needed for those who want to become self-employed. Currently the case managers have absolutely no clue on helping those who want to help themselves – such as seminars, business training on running a business. There also needs to be stronger financial incentives. [Welfare recipient, disabled]*

Many respondents, including employers, considered there needed to be more follow-up and support for people once they are in work, particularly for sole parents.

*Support in finding appropriate employment and remaining in employment. It should not be better for a person to be unemployed. [Past welfare recipient]*

Some felt that more support could be given for people to obtain their driver's licence. This could include attending driving courses. and the ability to sit driver's license tests should be more accessible to those on low incomes.

*Can they get to work? Welfare support could contribute to ensuring candidates have their licence. And look to assist getting candidates to work for example, subsidising the workplace to pick up and drop off employees. [Employer]*

Other respondents made suggestions that included alternatives to traditional work opportunities such as social enterprises, reinstatement of employment co-ordinators who have lived experience of having a disability or health condition and a return to former models of public employment services such as the Employment Service, which could provide intensive employment support services that integrate with other labour market programmes.

## 6.2 Training and education

### Increased employment support

Some respondents considered that Work and Income was already assisting in providing good training and education opportunities for people.

*I think there are some really amazing case managers that are encouraging and know the system and empower their clients. They invite people to training courses and suggest pathways to work. [Past welfare recipient]*

However, many more respondents commented there are not enough training opportunities or courses providing real and constructive assistance to get back into work. Retraining options and opportunities were also seen as important and necessary for people to up-skill or learn new skills, especially for those who may not be able to return to their previous type of employment.

*Offer courses that actually make sense and help; not how to apply for a job or write a CV when someone has been part of the workforce for 10–20+ years. If there aren't jobs out there no amount of CVs workshops are going to help. Courses on business development might help, then people can create their own jobs and possibly jobs for others as well. [Past welfare recipient]*

### Changing nature of work

Some respondents commented on the changing nature of the workplace and the likelihood of reduced employment security with increasing technological advances. The importance of providing training opportunities in the current environment was emphasised by many respondents.

*Can't assume nature of work will remain the same. Seeing lots of changes of workplaces. [Christchurch meeting of employment interest groups]*

*There is a need for increased focus by MSD and Work and Income on employment assistance, training, and the acquisition of new skills to respond to the changing world of work. [NZCTU]*

### Focus on youth

Young people in particular were seen by several respondents as needing courses or training programmes focusing on careers and jobs of interest to them. Courses tailored at particular jobs and a focus on apprenticeships were suggested.

*Need to have meaningful programmes that interest young people; not just hospitality classes to learn how to wash dishes. [Friend or family member of welfare recipient]*

### Flexibility for sole parents

Some considered there needed to be more training opportunities that took into account the needs of sole parents.

*Provide more work/training opportunities with hours suitable for solo parents. [Past welfare recipient]*

### More retraining and study opportunities

Some respondents considered that there should be more funded part-time or long term study options to assist people into employment.

*Education/study is a really important part. Improve these provisions. [Hastings business group meeting]*

*Study should be encouraged, and beneficiaries should not be hindered from study. [Unite Union]*

*Encouraging up skilling and improving employability by providing better incentives to (complete) study than to be a jobseeker. [Individual respondent]*

Some said there needed to be more support directed at adult education. It was suggested that more resources could be put into funding adult community education courses for welfare recipients.

*Fund short courses like Wellington High community courses, Excel, Word etc. [Past welfare recipient]*

The suggestion was made that tertiary providers could be contracted to provide training courses targeted at up-skilling people to enter the workforce.

## 6.3 Transition to paid work/incentives

Many respondents discussed the need for more assistance with the transition to work, particularly for long-term welfare recipients. Some felt that the transition to employment needs to be made easier, and often the first six months are the hardest with no provision for sick leave and other entitlements.

Employers and welfare recipients spoke of Work and Income's unrealistic expectations for people newly placed in jobs to attend appointments and the difficulty in attending these due to transport and timing issues. There was a general request for greater flexibility and more understanding of work conditions and perhaps case managers working more closely with employers and employees.

*Once the challenges to starting work are addressed, we need to look to make the transition to work easier for the employer. The responsibility to get alongside the new employees should be shared by the employer and also the welfare system. Potentially looking to have case workers co-ordinate and work alongside small crews to facilitate the transition to work. Currently the worker is placed with the employer and there appears to be an all care no responsibility response from the welfare system. We need to work together to ensure the support is in place for the worker to make the work placement stick. [Employer]*

### Costs of workforce participation

Some respondents felt there was no acknowledgment of the cost for welfare recipients in returning to work in some situations, such as transport costs, obtaining suitable clothing and parking. And there needed to be better support and assistance to help people stay in work.

*The costs of going to work are really high especially in rural areas with no public transport. [Welfare recipient]*

Some respondents suggested providing extra weeks of income support in the first weeks of full time work or work bonus payments paid for a set period, for example, four weeks on entering full-time work to help ease the financial burden. Other measures suggested to assist with the transition to work included free childcare and transport for those seeking work. A few respondents suggested there should be an allowance to cover the costs involved in working, such as appropriate clothing, parking and transport to and from work.

*Access to transport can be difficult when there is infrequent or non-existent public transport outside of cities, and clients cannot afford to buy their own vehicle. We need to think of more innovative ways to support clients without transport, such as ride-sharing options which are accessible through Work and Income. Similarly some clients struggle with reliable access to childcare and we could do more to support with options. [MSD employee]*

### **Motivational incentives**

Some respondents considered that more incentives were needed to motivate people to look for work. Various options were suggested to achieve this such as making a higher benefit amount short term to incentivise getting a job; time-limited benefits were suggested such as the Jobseeker Support being available for a maximum of five years over a lifetime or a benefit that supports for a limited time at a reasonable level but reduces over time.

A few respondents thought the Work Bonus as well as the Transition to Work Grant should be available for all welfare recipients starting or returning to full-time employment.

### **Training incentives**

Several respondents considered that the Training Incentive Allowance should be reinstated and applied more widely. This was seen as having helped a lot of people in the past.

*Bring back training incentives allowance. [Nelson community forum]*

*Time to restore the Training Incentive Allowance. Key way to enable training. [Lower Hutt community forum]*

Some people commented that training for jobs should be fully subsidised and subsidised childcare should be provided so that parents can study.

### **Incentivising employers**

Some saw there was a need for government to provide more support to encourage businesses to employ welfare recipients. A few respondents commented favourably on the Work and Income subsidies given to small businesses to employ welfare recipients. Some considered that Work and Income staff could be establishing stronger working relationships with their local business community and employers to provide sustainable employment.

*The relationship between the case worker and the employer needs to be close and ongoing, so that a greater understanding can be found, which in turn would increase the chance of us working together to provide sustainable employment for currently unemployed candidates. Social issues are often an issue and needs to be managed by the three parties involved, employee, employer and case worker. The employer needs support here to balance the desire. [Employer]*

## 6.4 Work obligations

There are a set of work obligations that recipients of Jobseeker Support must comply with. These can be full time, part time or deferred (for up to six months). Part time and deferred work obligations may apply due to a health condition or disability (HCD).

A few respondents expressed support for the current job search obligations and considered they were working well.

*The tougher requirements on long-term beneficiaries to actually actively be showing they are looking for work. Too many have taken advantage of the system because they never had to prove that they were actively looking forward to work.*  
[Past welfare recipient]

### Excessive work obligations

However, many more respondents expressed the view there are too many requirements for welfare recipients to prove they are looking for a job. Examples given were the number of compulsory monthly "job search" meetings with a case manager and welfare recipients who are on Jobseeker Support being required to attend multiple courses on CV writing.

Some respondents reported feeling pressured to look for work even when they considered there was little or no suitable work available. Some commented on the pressure and obligations that sole parents with young children feel they are put under to find work and the impact of this on their children.

*There should be encouragement to find jobs, but not bullying. Really there should be jobs to go to in the first place.* [Welfare recipient]

*Government should take a role in creating jobs, not just pushing people into low paid precarious jobs and blaming them if even those jobs don't exist.* [Past welfare recipient]

*[The system] has exacerbated my mental health issues to almost unbearable levels. Pressuring people in such an extreme way is entirely counter productive. What is the point in applying for dozens of jobs per week that you are completely incapable of being able to do, not to mention the confidence-destroying effect of rejection after rejection and humiliation of failure? It's just a pointless numbers game.*  
[Welfare recipient]

### Suitability of work offered

A few respondents commented that people were being forced to find work for which they were unsuitable through illness.

*Also, it's absurd that we force everyone to be a "job seeker". While many people are on the benefit to cover a temporary period of unemployment and are trying to get back into work, there are also legitimate situations where that really isn't appropriate, for example, when they have health or disability issues that prevent them from working, or when they're the primary caregiver for a small child.*  
[Individual respondent]

*The focus seems to be on getting people into or back to work, rightly, but anecdotally, some people with permanent disability have reported to me that it is hard to access financial support without being harassed regularly to get into work, even though the nature of their disability precludes it.* [Friend/family member of welfare recipient]

A few respondents commented on the expectations on hours of work for older people between sixty and sixty-five and the difficulty for them in doing physical work.

*I'm already stressed, already on edge. Don't need someone to tell me to get a job, what my problems are. I want to know how I am going to pay the rent or eat. I worked for forty-six years; then at sixty-two lost job and lost sight. No one wants to employ me at sixty-two with limited sight. Now I get pension and am treated so kindly. But I see people at WINZ office treated so badly. [New Plymouth community forum]*

## 6.5 Working while on a benefit

Many respondents commented on the difficulties with the requirements of the welfare system for people employed in temporary, seasonal or casual work. Many suggested that MSD adopt IRD's annual declaration of income rather than the current weekly declaration.

One aspect that was mentioned often was the requirement to declare income in advance, but the nature of seasonal work and temporary contracts means that the declaration is often incorrect, which then incurs a debt to Work and Income.

*Seasonal work is a real issue. The complexities and requirements of the welfare system for these people are enormous. [Welfare recipient]*

A few respondents noted that the welfare system does not work well for self-employed people or those who wished to become self-employed.

*The WINZ system does not work well around self-employment for reporting income so I always felt at risk of investigation. A self-employed person cannot confirm their income until their accounts are completed well after the end of the financial year; however reporting is required to be done weekly. [Past welfare recipient]*

Some commented on the high effective marginal tax rates faced by beneficiaries with part-time jobs.

*If someone gets part-time employment, allow them to receive this on a primary not secondary tax rate as their benefit is already at a tax deducted rate unless WINZ is going to start paying individuals a benefit equal to forty hours at minimum wage. [NGO employee]*

We heard from a lot of people with permanent conditions with fluctuating levels of impairment, such as some mental health and neurological conditions, who said they would like to work but this could only be intermittent. However they reported that system complexity, abatement rates, and stand-downs prevented them from building their capacity and maximising their independence.

## 6.6 Reciprocity

Reciprocity was mentioned by some respondents who considered that it should be a feature of the welfare system. Some felt that those unwilling to work should not receive income support or receive a lower amount than those making efforts to become independent.

### Participation as return for a benefit

Some respondents suggested that all welfare recipients should attend skills-based courses to qualify for the benefit.

*All people on unemployment benefit should attend skills-based courses in areas of interest and demand. They need to have high attendance and pass their course to continue receiving a benefit. It should be a temporary measure for a set period and decrease over time. [An employee]*

It was suggested by some respondents that all welfare recipients should be expected to contribute to the community through voluntary work in order to receive the benefit. Suggested community based work included gardening, working with local authorities to keep the streets free of litter and graffiti and park maintenance work. Administration-based work in the community was suggested for those who weren't able to do physical work.

*I feel if on a benefit, then you should have to contribute to your community in order to receive it. [Past welfare recipient]*

### Participation for personal development and inclusion

At some community forums, people expressed support for a return to some of the community job creation programmes such as PEP or more recently Taskforce Green. These programmes were seen to be of benefit to the participants as well as the community.

*It felt good to be able to walk around town and say "I did that". Gives you something to do and you don't feel like you're bludging. [Greymouth Community Forum]*

A large group of respondents saw volunteering, or other forms of contribution, as a way for people to be recognised as valued members of their communities, as well as maintaining or building their self-esteem, their time management and social skills and the social connections and networks that would help them secure paid work.

*Volunteering should be suitable to meet work obligations until employment is achieved. Benefits of this is a routine and skills for the person, including mental health benefits of contributing to society. [Past welfare recipient]*

*The welfare system should be underpinned by many values. One of them is generosity – a desire to help others, and to know that in doing so, one creates a better world for everyone. Another important value is reciprocity, in the sense that we all depend for our existence on others, and thus have an obligation to help them when they are in need. A focus on reciprocity, in addition, justifies the demand that welfare recipients perform certain activities useful to society, as outlined above, as opposed to a focus on universalism, which would see benefits granted unconditionally, simply as a mark of the recipient's humanity. [Individual respondent]*

## Community-based approach

A group of respondents considered that the community has an important role to play in supporting people and it is not just the state's responsibility to provide ongoing support. It was viewed as important that we encourage people to be self-supporting within their communities and that communities are working together well.

*We need to be increasing the functionality of people to be self-sufficient within their communities so that where at all possible communities are working together to support each other to become more resilient and adaptable. [NGO employee]*

*The welfare system needs to recognise and support a wider range of ways for people to contribute through paid and unpaid work, in open employment, micro and social enterprises, co-operatives, self employment and volunteering, as well as through wider contributions such as, for example, the arts, providing friendship and support to others and actively participating in their communities. [NGO employee]*

## Incentives

Some respondents considered there needed to be incentives and recognition for welfare recipients to participate in voluntary work within the community.

*Many people want to perform works in the public and community good. So little is done to encourage this in lieu of private employment and it is to the negative detriment of communities around the country. [NGO employee]*

*Where someone has been jobless for a long time or quickly come back to benefit after gaining work that they have to undertake voluntary work or a work for the dole scheme – this needs to come with assistance for the extra costs that person experiences due to having to be somewhere regularly. [MSD employee]*

## More recognition of roles

Many respondents were of the view that the current focus of the welfare system is on paid work and this does not acknowledge the important work and the contribution to society that being a stay-at-home parent or caregiver of children or people with disabilities or health problems provides. It was considered that this work was not sufficiently valued or funded.

*Care of dependents should be recognised as essential work; regardless of whether this is the necessary care of children, family members or relatives. [Unite Union]*

*Parenting is the single most important job we have. [Greymouth community forum]*

*There are costs to undermining parenting. These come later. [Invercargill community forum]*

In addition, some parents home schooling their children considered that this should be recognised as work (albeit unpaid work) and they shouldn't be required to seek employment.

*I believe that as a home school parent I deserve to be recognised as working twenty hours of work per week. It would be wonderful to be able to make the decision to home school my children without the added pressure of finding an additional twenty hours of work to somehow fit on top of the work I am already doing. [Welfare recipient]*

## 6.7 Housing Support

Most respondents expressed the view that access to warm, dry and healthy homes is a basic right and every person should have the protection of a home. It was noted by some respondents that a home address was needed before a benefit could be obtained.

*Housing should be a right for ALL people and more efforts made to ensure that this is the case in New Zealand.* [Past welfare recipient]

*Everyone should have the right to the security of a home to at least call their own, and in which family members should be encouraged to support one another.* [Welfare recipient]

Many respondents expressed concern at the standard of housing that is currently available.

*House people in permanent, safe, dry, healthy public affordable rental or other housing.* [Welfare recipient]

*Basic, decent housing for all. Government houses should be well-maintained, insulated and heated.* [Society of St Vincent De Paul]

Many respondents expressed concern at the cost of housing on household budgets and the lack of affordable housing and felt there needed to be equitable access to suitable and affordable housing.

*Housing is unaffordable and will continue to be a problem for future generations.* [Wellington (Newtown) community forum]

*At present, New Zealand housing costs are a huge burden on household budgets that is eroding the health, security and welfare of beneficiaries and many other households.* [Past welfare recipient]

*We need housing security based on a level of support to ensure that all people in New Zealand can access affordable housing and no one has to be homeless.* [Past welfare recipient]

Many respondents felt that the existing supply of social housing was inadequate, which was resulting in people struggling to find places to live. Some respondents attributed this situation to the sale of state houses in some areas and the failure to build the large number of houses that are required. Many respondents considered there needed to be a long-term commitment to substantially increasing the stock of social housing to ensure a level of affordable quality rental accommodation was available to meet housing demand.

*Far more state housing – leaving housing to the market economy hasn't worked.* [St Francis of Assisi Trust]

*We need a mass programme of state house construction to provide housing for those in need.* [Past welfare recipient]

Some people commented that there was a shortage of housing for people with physical disabilities who need adapted facilities in the home.

*Why isn't Housing New Zealand required to supply housing for the disabled community?* [Welfare recipient]

Some wanted to see government agencies working more closely together to address housing issues to provide adequate support for families and children. Some thought there needed to be better management of the existing state housing stock.

*Housing support should be integrated as far as possible with the social welfare system to ensure that social and housing support is provided in a wrap-around fashion to provide adequate support around children and families. [Barnados]*

*Social Housing/Housing New Zealand needs changing. The service for the clients is not seamless. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Work with other government agencies to make sure there's enough housing for people, as so many are living in motels and that is costing so much. [Welfare recipient]*

Some respondents wanted to see a greater commitment to raising rates of home ownership. One option proposed was that the government increase access to shared equity housing for low income families wanting to buy into a house.

*Make a long-term commitment to increasing the stock of social housing, supporting secure tenancies and raising rates of home ownership. [Methodist Alliance]*

*State-funded housing with interest-free loans that the occupants gradually repay via the funds that the state would normally provide for their rental accommodation. [Individual respondent]*

Several respondents expressed concern at the level of homelessness and people in emergency housing situations. A few respondents expressed concerns about safety.

*People are being forced into unsafe housing. Unsafe boarding houses. [Palmerston North youth forum]*

*[We are concerned about] housing and lack of suitable housing, children and families in emergency accommodation long term. [Wellington Roundtable]*

Some wanted to see more support for the homeless or people in emergency housing situations. Some suggestions were that welfare recipients shouldn't be required to pay back Work and Income loans for staying in emergency accommodation such as motels.

There were also calls for other forms of housing assistance including caps on rents, greater support when looking for accommodation such as access to the internet in Work and Income offices for Trademe rental properties, and assistance with going to view rental accommodation. The comment was made that rental accommodation could be set aside in each region suitable for low income tenants.

*Housing should be provided through state houses, not motels, or landlords should have rent caps and some rentals in every area be set aside for low income tenants. [Past welfare recipient]*

## 6.8 Other forms of support

### Budgeting services

Under the existing Income Support system, people must meet certain obligations to receive hardship assistance. These obligations include taking reasonable steps to increase their incomes or decrease their costs, and sometimes require attending a budgeting course.

Some respondents considered there was a need for more education and support around budgeting. But there was general recognition that trying to meet financial commitments on the current benefit rates was impossible for individuals and their families.

A few respondents commented that it was important for young people to have financial management education.

Some people considered that budgeting courses should be compulsory.

*Mandatory budgeting workshops to help people live within their means, with skills taught to stretch their pennies. I am sure a volunteer network of frugal retirees and long-term beneficiaries could assist with this. [Welfare recipient]*

A few respondents suggested that budget advisers are needed for those unable to budget to help make weekly, monthly and annual budgets.

*Some basic budgeting advice, for example, power-saving tips, cheap but nutritious meal ideas – but written from a perspective of someone who is on a lower income and rents a lower-quality house ... I know there are community budgeting services, but it would be great to see MSD provide a budgeting service as well (or fund the community services properly) so that everyone can have an initial consultation when going onto the benefit, and another one every few months after that. [Welfare recipient]*

Many people commented that budgeting services are not enough when welfare recipients' incomes aren't adequate to meet living costs.

*We shouldn't be sending people for endless budgeting sessions when it is clear from previous budgeting sessions that a lack of money is the main problem. [Past welfare recipient]*

Other suggestions included:

- Providing budgeting software on the Work and Income website, for example, a downloadable budgeting app could be installed on MyMSD to enable beneficiaries to work out their budgets
- Introducing a "wellbeing assessment" to be completed by Work and Income as part of a client's initial benefit application, and at other critical times
- Restoring funding to independent budgeting services
- Extending financial literacy courses, for example, loans, credit cards, finance companies.

## Life skills

Some respondents considered that other wide-ranging holistic support was needed to assist and empower people to become self-supporting, generally referred to as life skills. A few respondents felt that young people, in particular, needed training in life skills to help them become contributing members of society.

*As a society, we need to be responsible for people and teach them to be responsible for themselves. If parents are unable to parent and we find ourselves supporting someone who has behaviours that reflect bad choices, our role is to assist and support. We have become so PC we have lost sight often of the real need of people. [NGO employee]*

The range of support suggested included offering free self-improvement, confidence-building programmes that build people's self-esteem.

*Free self-improvement courses that actually build people's self-esteem and confidence. [Past welfare recipient]*

Other training courses suggested included cooking on a budget, gardening and how to grow food, sewing classes, preparation for renting and becoming a good tenant and how to obtain a driver's licence.

*Given that there are now cases of three-generational families dependent on the welfare system, I think that MSD could drive an educational and hands-on approach for some needs, that is, real-life experiences for budgeting, cooking. [Welfare recipient]*

*A generation seems to have also missed out on cooking skills – I saw a young woman kindly returning the kilo of mince she had been given the previous day – as she said she had no cats. She did not realise it could be made into so many human dishes. [Social Worker]*

Some respondents saw the need for parenting support and education classes in the community.

*I believe in the importance of parenting and reducing the pressure to go back to work early, however, I also believe in the importance of parenting support and education and that MSD needs to be funding a far more educational and preventive parenting support in every community. Parenting programmes need to be regular and accessible and normalised, which means we need a lot more of them. [NGO employee]*

## Health and wellbeing services

Many welfare recipients have experienced trauma of some form, such as family violence or forced redundancy. Others become distressed as a result of the experience of losing financial independence and the social status and connection of being in the paid workforce and struggling to get by on a benefit.

Access to treatment and support for psychological distress, mental health issues and addictions was frequently raised as key services that welfare recipients and those on low incomes needed support to be able to access.

They argued that maintaining mental wellbeing is essential for positive family functioning, effective parenting, staying motivated to participate in training and seek paid employment and to avoid the development of more serious mental health issues.

Several respondents considered there needed to be more funding to offer quality mental health services. Some respondents considered that a more integrated approach was required among government agencies such as the Ministries of Health, Education, Social Development, Justice and Corrections to address mental health and addiction issues. It was felt that services needed to be more responsive and subsidised to ensure a level of equity.

Many respondents felt that there should be access to counselling support. Some felt basic counselling might be provided directly, but most recommended that financial support should be available to access professional counselling when required.

*I really think that I should have been offered counselling when I turned up needing the Sole Parent benefit after a traumatic event. [Welfare recipient]*

*Work and Income branches should all have a free counsellor available for people in difficult circumstances as well as an occupational therapist that can work with people with health issues that require specialised assessment for work readiness and goal planning for the same. [Friend/family member of welfare recipient]*

A large number of respondents expressed concern about lack of support to access health and dental services. Respondents appreciated that welfare is intended to be a short-term safety net that assumes people can get their needs attended to when they are back on their feet. However, they challenged this assumption in the current environment where it is difficult to find suitable paid work and where much work is low paid.

Policies focused on low-cost responses to urgent health and dental needs were seen as short-sighted and likely to be counter productive, especially when viewed from a whole of government perspective. Avoiding short-term costs for non-emergency work and only paying for the lowest cost care was seen as likely to result in poorer health and wellbeing, and higher costs in the long term.

## Social work services

Some respondents considered that access to the support that can be provided by social workers would be more helpful for welfare recipients who find themselves in difficult and often complex situations. It was felt that social workers are trained and qualified to engage with people with empathy and assess situations in a comprehensive and holistic manner in the context of their family, whānau and communities.

*Families on long-term assistance (unemployment) need a social worker attached to them to help them work towards employment. When you have generations of one family not working, you almost need to find jobs for the whole family at the same time, not just one of them or that one person will feel like they are missing out on what is happening at home and soon will stop going to their job (there are always exceptions). [Past welfare recipient]*

# 7 Income support

The main benefits are Jobseeker Support, Jobseeker – Health Condition or Disability, Sole Parent Support, Supported Living Payment, Youth Payment and Young Parent Payment. These benefits are both income and asset tested and are subject to abatement thresholds and rates.

Many respondents referred to the complexity of the current system and how difficult it was to access the many disparate elements of income support.

*I think the elements of financial support are disparate and hard to access. At one point, I had Sole Parent Support, accommodation supplement, childcare subsidy and working for families tax credits that all had different elements involved when it came to applying for them, or they had different income and savings cuts offs.*  
[Welfare recipient]

## 7.1 What should the level be?

An overwhelming number of respondents suggested benefits needed to be increased to bring them to a sufficient level to enable people to live with dignity and to be able to take part in community activities, rather than just surviving. Some respondents thought the level should be sufficient to enable the children of beneficiaries to participate in recreation, sport and other activities.

*People should receive enough to provide security of shelter, food, power, health, wellbeing and ability to care for others properly. This will need to happen in conjunction with improvements in other services such as social housing, public transport and affordable healthcare.* [Welfare recipient]

*Everyone is about \$100 short a week.* [Welfare recipient]

*The barest minimum is not enough for a healthy sane community. It needs to increase in quality and range to reflect the changing needs of our multicultural population. It needs to encourage inclusiveness, community sharing and cross-cultural support and education and personal responsibility and consideration.*  
[Welfare recipient]

*It keeps people from achieving their rights as per the UDHR by expecting people to live on the poverty line.* [Past welfare recipient]

A very significant number of respondents stated that benefit levels should be increased so that they were related to a reasonable cost of living.

*Well for start we need to be paid more. I make a simple budget, and my income is half my budget. I can't buy food nor my pain management medicine. I have to go eat bread from the NB food fridge, and if I am lucky, there might be other stuff there other than bread.* [Welfare recipient]

*Make it so people can live. This will encourage people to work and declare it.*  
[Welfare recipient]

Many suggested the increase should be "significant" or "substantial".

*Substantially increase benefit levels to ensure an income where people can live with dignity.* [Past welfare recipient]

*Substantially improve core benefits. Immediately increase all core benefits by at least 20 percent.* [Past welfare recipient]

Many respondents felt that low benefits were not having the intended effect.

*Support increases in basic benefit levels to ensure that people can live in dignity in their communities and enjoy full social and economic participation. Benefit levels have been suppressed for many years, with the intention of "incentivising work". This policy fails to recognise that for many people, work is either unavailable or impossible and has caused significant hardship and suffering." [PSA]*

An increase to a liveable or living wage was a frequently suggested option, with moving to a universal basic income (UBI) also highly favoured. Many respondents commented that the administrative simplicity of a universal basic income and the removal of benefit stigma would be major advantages.

*The current benefit system is expensive to administer. Cheaper to administer is National Superannuation. This creates the argument for a universal basic income. I understand the challenges in introducing it – but it has major advantages, especially now that we don't have one job for life anymore. [Past welfare recipient]*

*This will effectively eliminate the need for WINZ saving the country billions in this utterly unnecessary and wasteful bureaucracy. Because the UBI is paid to everybody, this eliminates any concern about people working and getting less than they can get on a benefit. And because the UBI is paid to everybody, there is no need to worry about whether people are in relationships or working or running a business or whatever; the cost of those investigations is gone. [Welfare recipient]*

*I'm particularly taken by the notion of a universal basic income because it immediately reduces stigmatisation. I'd like to see something that works towards that as the basis of something that is dignified, allowed access to by all and part of our nature in seeing that we all have a basic right. [Past welfare recipient]*

Respondents variously suggested that benefit levels should be increased by between 20 and 30 percent, or by a weekly amount, or that a main benefit should be between \$500 and \$600 a week, or \$20,000 a year (equivalent to \$385 per week).

*I think the government needs to be paying at least \$600 a week for job seekers. They should pay for WOF and rego as this is also a safety issue, and cars are needed to get to work opportunities. They would also pay for mobile phones. The excuse "It was a foreseeable expense" should be scrapped as this is ridiculous and infuriating when we cannot budget for it because there is not enough money. [Welfare recipient]*

*Benefit payments for job seekers, youth and de facto relationships need to at least meet minimum wage for at least a 35–40 hour per week. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Benefit levels, particularly for those needing long-term support and unable to work at all, are not sufficient to participate as normal members of society. This creates an underclass and leads to high levels of poor health and social isolation. [Welfare recipient]*

Some respondents thought benefit levels should be minimal for job seekers, enough to cover only emergency needs, in order to encourage people to work.

Some thought the current levels were about right; a few noted the relativity between benefit rates and the minimum wage was balanced.

*Enough for people to live with dignity but not so much that people don't bother to get out of welfare and to being able to sustain themselves. [Past welfare recipient]*

*I feel the level of support currently provided is about the right balance, given that wages are so low for the working poor. [Welfare recipient]*

A few respondents suggested that benefit levels should be lower to provide a greater incentive for people to move off a benefit.

*Lowering welfare so it can only provide a meagre existence that no reasonable person would want to stay on long term. [Past welfare recipient]*

Some respondents noted that a person working in a low-paid job might not be much better off financially than being on a benefit. There were several examples provided of people whose income dropped when they got a job.

*It shouldn't be cheaper to stay on a benefit than to have a job. [Past welfare recipient]*

*No one on a benefit should get more net into their bank account than someone working full time. [MSD employee]*

*There should be additional support for those in work but whose wages are below or close to minimum wage, so that people can feel the benefits of working. This must include child care assistance for parents. [MSD employee]*

### **Higher levels of support for some groups**

A great many respondents suggested there should be higher levels of support for some groups. These included people permanently unable to work; those with disabilities, chronic illness or mental illness; people caring for family members with medical conditions; sole parents; the young; released prisoners; domestic violence victims; grandparents; and foster parents.

We heard from several people who suggested there should be an increase in benefit levels for people living alone, and that these people hadn't benefited from the introduction of schemes such as the Families Package and so were suffering greater deprivations.

Some respondents suggested there should be increased financial assistance for people aged between sixty and sixty-five, who were very unlikely to find paid employment.

*A special category for people who are between sixty and sixty-five who find themselves unable to work needs to be developed. This group are unlikely to rejoin the workforce and need to be given extra assistance, support and especially be treated with dignity. [Past welfare recipient]*

## Supported Living Payment

The Supported Living Payment is the main benefit for disabled people and people with long-term health conditions who are assessed as being unable to work more than fifteen hours a week for at least two years. It is paid at a higher rate than the standard Jobseeker Support, recognising that this is not a temporary setback that a person will recover from. The payment is intended to cover living costs, with the Disability Allowance intended to cover additional costs related to the health condition or disability.

There was strong support for an increase in the level of the Supported Living Payment because many recipients were likely to be on it for their lifetimes. Some respondents suggested the level be increased by \$100 per week. Many thought that people with a health condition, injury or disability that meant they couldn't work needed more financial support to achieve a decent quality of life. This was particularly so for people with a mental illness as there was a risk the lack of money could worsen their mental health.

*Everyone should have enough support to lead a good life, especially those with illnesses and disabilities where circumstances are unlikely to change. [Past welfare recipient]*

*I am a disabled person on the Supported Living Payment. In my experience, we just aren't given enough financial assistance to live independently. The payments are not enough for us to live meaningful, dignified lives, especially since the cost of living is much higher for disabled people in terms of accommodation and buying easy-to-prepare food as well as medical costs. [Welfare recipient]*

*When it comes to people on an invalids benefit, there should be much more help. I've been house-bound and bed-bound for three years unable to clean my home and only recently a friend told me there's a possibility of home help. Yet NEVER did a WINZ staff member tell me this. I had to repair my own mobility scooter because I couldn't afford to take it to the service centre, but because I'm so sick, it took several weeks to fix what a healthy person could fix in half a day. [Welfare recipient]*

Some respondents thought the Supported Living Payment was providing appropriate support.

*The Supported Living payment is working well for folk with a permanent genetic disability. It is great that they and/or their guardian do not have to repeatedly explain their condition each year as that is an unnecessary painful and heartless process. [Friend or family member of a welfare recipient]*

Those with high additional costs related to their disability or health condition were most likely to report that the Supported Living Payment is insufficient to top up the shortfall of the Disability Allowance.

## Youth Payment and Young Parent Payment

These payments are administered by the Youth Services Support Unit (YSSU) for people aged from sixteen to seventeen years who are not supported by their parents and people aged from sixteen to nineteen years who have dependent children, both single and partnered. Recipients have money loaded onto a payment card to purchase food, groceries and other items and services at specified outlets. Costs such as accommodation and utilities are paid directly to suppliers, and an allowance of up to \$50 per week is paid into the recipient's personal bank account. This is known as the Money Management system.

Some respondents commented that the level of assistance needs to be increased.

*Youth payments do not meet any standard of living for them. There seems to be an assumption that they need less even though board payments or rent are the same as for everyone else. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Youth Payment – unrealistic amount of benefit paid for those in need, accommodation supplement and additional support should increase. [NGO employee]*

There was a perception that people on these benefits did not receive the same level of service from YSSU as others did from Work and Income.

*Tasks to be completed quicker by YSSU for youth and parent payment as quick as they can do it at WINZ. It's unfair how younger people have to wait a longer period of time to get the same needs. More support for teenage mums to get accommodation if needed. So many are wanting their own place but don't know how they can afford it and end up staying in unhealthy environments because of it. [NGO employee]*

Some people expressed concern that the Money Management system operated by YSSU unduly restricted young people's consumer choices and financial control and suggested the system should be abolished, made voluntary or required only for those who had demonstrated they were unable to manage their own money. They also suggested that YSSU should be more closely aligned with youth development goals, building their capacity to meet their aspirations.

## 7.2 What costs should be covered?

Respondents generally agreed that the main benefits should cover the costs of rent, food, power, clothing and shoes, healthcare, transport and education.

*A living package for each family needing support that covers food, healthcare, accommodation, power, phone and more government-funded work courses available for people on welfare to change their future outcomes. [Welfare recipient]*

*Provision of public transport subsidies for people on benefits especially those with children. The cost of buses is often a significant drain on resources especially for parents/caregivers getting children to school. An example of this is a father with a disability, who could not drive due to his medical condition, having to spend \$45 per week to take his five-year-old to school. [NGO employee]*

*More financial support to children's educational needs – currently there is some support for stationery and uniforms and so on; but consider the current society – schools are moving into technologies; support children to access technology in the home – internet, devices. [Past welfare recipient]*

Some respondents believed benefits should also cover the costs of computers and internet access, social and cultural participation, costs associated with the search for employment and pets.

*Include the cost of personal internet access and cellphone as part of the core benefit. It is self-defeating to say that information is available on the website if the beneficiary is unable to access it, and it is ridiculous not to acknowledge that it is a very real cost of today's society. [Welfare recipient]*

*A computer or laptop needs to be an essential item (same as a TV, bed). Basic internet cost covered in TAS (up to an allowable amount). [NGO employee]*

*Recognise that pets are family members too and therefore are dependents. Include the care and feeding in the budget with proof of costs. [Welfare recipient]*

### 7.3 Vouchers and other non-cash approaches

Some people advocated for vouchers, cards or stamps for basic items such as accommodation, food and power. A smaller number suggested clothing, school fees and petrol should also be paid by vouchers. The reason frequently given was to ensure that beneficiaries spent their money on necessities rather than items such as alcohol or tobacco. Many also suggested that some costs could be paid directly by WINZ, so accommodation costs could be paid directly to landlords and utilities bills paid directly to the supplier so that beneficiaries did not get behind with these bills and take the pressure off those who found this aspect of budgeting difficult.

*With the exception of the elderly, the unwell and caregivers raising other people's children – only the necessities of food, power and rent should be assisted and through payment cards as opposed to cash so that those necessities are in fact being covered, not put off to the side in favour of addictive habits such as smoking, drinking and drugs. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Instead of increasing benefits/allowances to cover rising food and living costs, schools should be funded to supply breakfast and lunch to students ensuring that every child in New Zealand is able to eat the same quality of good food. Ensuring ALL children are taken care of will take the pressure off all families, not just those on welfare, by allowing them to use current food allowances on decent dinner meals, hygiene products other household necessities. It's not about telling welfare recipients how to spend the money they have but making sure that certain areas are covered without the need to think about it or stress about it. [A friend or family member of a welfare recipient]*

*Rent and power paid direct to the providers, which will help clients with their budget. Food money put on their green cards. If they have the basics then what is left from their benefit is theirs to decide what is important to them to spend their money on, but they will have the basics taken care of. [Past welfare recipient]*

Some took a different view.

*Spending on programme design and delivery can be more expensive and less effective than getting more cash into the hands of families. [Office of the Children's Commissioner]*

## 7.4 Support for people with disabilities or health conditions

The largest group from whom we received submissions were disabled people and people with long-term health conditions, who accounted for roughly a third of all submissions.

The overwhelming majority of respondents said that disabled people and people with health conditions who were genuinely and permanently unable to work should receive a higher level of income support than those temporarily out of work.

The main rationale given was that this group, through no fault of their own, would most likely be on welfare for life. The level of hardship many experience while in receipt of income support was seen as unsustainable in the longer term, especially for those with additional costs (such as suitable housing, transport, equipment, dietary requirements, treatment and medication) or those unable to adopt strategies for living cheaply (for example, by walking places or growing their own food or doing housework and maintenance). The longer someone is on a benefit, the fewer resources they have to draw on, and the less resilient they are to unexpected costs or infrequent peaks in outgoings. It was recognised that this could lead to extreme and persistent hardship with significant negative impacts on the wellbeing of the individual and their whānau. In addition, unlike other welfare recipients, they would have very limited opportunity to improve their circumstances in the future.

*Latest stats show that the median income of disabled people from all sources is half that of non-disabled people and that they are likely to get most of it from benefits. This is shocking that we expect some of the most vulnerable to survive on half the income others do. When you consider this population also have fewer choices about housing or transport or clothing than others it is shocking. Raising all benefits to the level of National Superannuation would be a start. [Caregiver to a dependent adult]*

*S66A allows income earning with SLP – this needs to be applied for everyone with disabilities. [Wellington City Mission meeting]*

Respondents felt that disabled people and people with long term health conditions should have a good standard of living, should not be subject to onerous processes for maintaining the continuity of their income support and should be exempt from any employment obligations. It was suggested that restrictions on international travel should not be applied to this group so that they can enjoy an overseas holiday, like other New Zealanders, without being penalised by loss of income.

While a full-time job is not an option for this group, it was felt that people should be supported to be contributing citizens, with opportunities to learn and grow, and be connected to others and included in community life. Some respondents receiving SLP were concerned that, because there was no work expectation, they received no support to be able to improve their circumstances through modest paid work even if it was less than fifteen hours a week and not in open employment (for example, through micro-enterprise).

The current system provides a disincentive to being in a relationship. Many thought this deprived some disabled people and people with long-term health conditions of having an intimate relationship and the emotional and practical support that usually comes with this.

*I feel strongly that benefit entitlements should be individual and not allocated based on relationship status. As a single person with a permanent disability, I can never enter a relationship unless my potential partner agrees to completely support me. So I am unlikely to be able to have a relationship, and surely I have a human right to be in a loving relationship. Making me reliant on a partner also makes me more likely to suffer abuse in a relationship and less likely to leave an abusive situation. [Welfare recipient, disabled]*

*People with chronic illnesses who are unable to work and whose spouse earns at least the average wage are not eligible for any financial support under the current welfare system. This means that they cannot live in dignity because they are dependent on someone else for their financial means (as well as help with personal care, in many cases). This makes them vulnerable to abuses of power, places stress on their relationships and causes them undue stress at a time when they are already facing significant uncertainty over their future wellbeing and security. [Caregiver to a dependent adult]*

*People with disabilities lose benefit if in a relationship or living with someone – this can be counterintuitive particularly if the partner can help the disabled client. [Nelson Community forum]*

Many respondents noted that the requirement to reapply every two years was inappropriate for people who had a permanent injury or health condition or a disability.

*It's ridiculous that I have to be reassessed every two years when my disability doesn't change. I will never get better or be able to work, yet my livelihood is put under threat every two years regardless. It's a waste of my time, my doctor's time and WINZ's time as well as being severely anxiety inducing. [Welfare recipient]*

*It's ridiculous that people with permanent disabilities, for example, missing limbs, have to regularly prove over again that they're still permanently disabled. Missing limbs don't grow back – it's just cruel and unnecessary to make them reapply! [Welfare recipient]*

Many people raised cases where MSD Health Advisors had overturned the findings of medical practitioners.

*Why don't they believe my specialist? Why is Work and Income the judge? [Greymouth Community Forum]*

It was suggested by some that all disabled people and people with long-term health conditions who are unable to work should receive SLP, with those who can work supported to come off SLP as soon as possible, which would provide an incentive for MSD to provide the best possible employment support.

## System anomalies

Several respondents noted that those under ACC but in similar circumstances were much better off than those relying on mainstream health and welfare services. A diverse range of anomalies and inconsistencies were identified within the welfare system.

It was noted that ACC pays 80 percent of a person's wage for accidental injuries and that the benefit payable for illness was very much less. Some respondents suggested that people unable to work because of illness or disability should be paid at the same level as those on ACC.

*Some people need extra help. I look after my husband who is disabled; we get less than people on ACC just because he's sick and will not get better.*  
[Welfare recipient]

*Currently, the welfare system does not recognise the cost of disability in a fair or consistent way. Some blind people receive the Supported Living Payment even though they are in full-time employment and some on high salaries. Although there is a historical reason for this discrepancy, it is discriminatory (some blind people qualify whilst other blind people don't) and is discriminatory and inconsistent in recognising the cost of disability across different disabled people. The Disability Allowance is means tested, yet disabled and Deaf people who are employed have substantial costs related to their disability, costs that can increase on gaining employment. Disabled and Deaf people face many barriers in society, and the additional costs related to being disabled is another barrier. There needs to be consideration and better understanding of, and recognition of, the cost of disability and exploration of a universal disability allowance. This all negatively impacts on disabled people's standard of living and ability to have an adequate income.* [NGO employee, disabled]

## Quality of life

Some respondents noted that the system focused almost exclusively on managing access to financial support and full-time work, but there was minimal concern for inclusion and wellbeing. It was suggested that those with higher needs should meet with case managers to make sure that they were doing well, and links should be made to other support services when required to ensure people were not marginalised and disconnected from society.

## Responsiveness of the system

Work and Income offices do not always provide a physical environment that is responsive to the needs of people with disabilities or health conditions. Several respondents noted issues with long waits standing in queues, environments that don't provide adequate seating or access to customer toilets and lighting that is harmful for people with certain conditions.

Some respondents appreciated the option of carrying out business online, especially for people with difficulties accessing Work and Income offices in person due to disability or health issues. It was noted though, that many people needed face-to-face support to be able to understand and complete the required forms and that the digital information still needed to be accessible and appropriate.

## Adequacy of financial support

Many respondents said that the financial support available to disabled people and people with long-term health conditions does not adequately take into account the additional costs many face. As a result, some disabled people and people with long-term health conditions experience severe hardship. This affects their quality of life and relationships, can impede their recovery and ability to work and could cause their condition to deteriorate.

*In the interests of equity, of kindness and fairness, it is government's responsibility to alleviate all costs incurred from mental illness and disability. Without a service delivery model that accounts for these needs, the financial burden, in our user-pays society, is thrown back upon these individuals. This is despite the fact that we live in a "welfare state".* [Welfare recipient, NGO employee]

Some respondents considered those permanently unable to undertake full-time work were in a poverty trap.

*They need to pay people with disabilities more. Her cochlear implant is broken. Who will pay to get it fixed? I can't.* [Auckland Deaf Society forum]

*It is very unfair that disabled people are treated the same as non-disabled in that their supplementary benefits are cut as soon as they have a few assets. So a person is allowed to own a house and still get benefits, but how can a disabled person ever save up for a house if their benefits are cut as soon as they reach \$8,100? That may be fair in the case of a person temporarily on a benefit, but it is not fair toward a disabled person who may never be able to work. That's not nearly enough for a deposit on a home – not even enough for a decent vehicle! So disabled are left in a cycle of poverty and without tenure of place/home – forced to rent cheap accommodation, which is not always healthy or safe.* [Friend or family member of a welfare recipient]

Some conditions and treatments can lead to increased health costs in other areas, compounding the impacts of the primary health condition or disability.

*There should be a better dental plan for the SLP. A dental allowance you can use for an annual check-up and fillings, extractions and so on if needed. Currently it has to be an emergency to receive dental assistance. So you have to wait until things get really bad, then you need a lot of work, which exceeds the \$300 non-repayable allowance and you have to get a repayable loan. (I have two I'm paying back.) Also you have to prove you have no money at all to get the emergency \$300.* [Welfare recipient]

Many felt that these impacts were not well-understood.

*Recently everyone receiving a benefit ... or superannuation, received a winter energy payment ... rich or poor. Yet when I approached Work and Income about the extra costs of electricity for running oxygen concentrator, CPAP machine, heater and so on for my son there was no help given towards our costs. Our winter electricity bills were over \$460 per month!!!* [Parent of a dependent adult]

## **Jobseeker Support – Health Condition or Disability**

This benefit is available to people with health conditions or disabilities that prevent them working but are expected to improve so that they will be able to work in future. It is paid at the same rate as Jobseeker Support, but the work obligations are waived for an initial period.

People on this benefit have the same outgoings as those on the Supported Living Payment but receive a lower income, and additionally they face regular and onerous compliance costs in relation to medical certificates to prove continued eligibility. This can place them in extreme financial hardship, which can become extended if recovery is slow. A great many respondents noted the stress and financial burden of having to visit a doctor every three months to obtain a medical certificate.

*Having to have regular medical checks for a condition that will not change to prove eligibility is stressful and a waste of resources. As is having to prove the additional costs related to a chronic condition or disability for the disability allowance. [Friend/ family member of welfare recipient]*

*If you are sick, you are forced to get medical certs ad hoc at your initial expense. To be reimbursed at a few cents per week when you have to find the full amount weekly or monthly depending on WINZ requirements or if you get a different WINZ person you have to explain all over again what your sickness issues are, the same when you are forced to see a doctor who is not your regular doctor. I am on a sickness benefit, yet there is no place for sickness, according to WINZ I am a job seeker with all the humiliation that goes with it. [Welfare recipient]*

## **Participating in paid work and other contributions**

Some disabled people and people with long-term health conditions on Jobseeker – Health Condition or Disability (HCD) expressed concern at being referred for work that was not suitable for them, including work that they simply could not do.

Some respondents said they had been placed on Jobseeker HCD and had only found out much later that they were eligible for Supported Living Payment. Some believed this was because staff were unfamiliar with entitlements and others believed there to be a policy of paying the minimum support possible irrespective of the impacts on clients.

## 7.5 Support for those caring for people with disabilities or health conditions

Some respondents suggested there should be more assistance for families supporting people with disabilities or health conditions.

*We think the Supported Living benefit should have a wider parameter, based not only on the level of care an individual needs but the impact on the family unit that that care brings and the circumstances and variables affecting them. [Welfare recipient]*

*For those with disability, provide additional resources for them and their carers. More funding for assisted care and for respite breaks for carers etc. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Look at the carers support benefit and split it into different categories with a support payment for people like me in the extreme range as some of us are being so badly supported that it is criminal. There should be a special support payment for us the carers of extremely high needs [children] it is probably only about 2–5 percent of us that would qualify but we deserve to be recognised for the 24/7 care we give. [Caregiver of dependent child]*

Some respondents noted there was an impact on the lives of those caring for disabled people and people with long-term health conditions – who were often their partners, parents or other family members including young carers and grandparents.

*In relation to dementia, the problems are so huge, and so ignored – the current government has made no mention of dementia in its policies to date. At present those of us involved have the carers' support and free incontinence products. We need the level of support outlined in the "New Zealand Framework for Dementia Care", written but never implemented. It was produced by the Ministry of Health, however the overlap with the welfare system is considerable. The level of care we are receiving at present is not adequate. Many of us lose our jobs, our incomes, our retirement and our savings. We need a level of support which is not just words, political expediency and going through the motions. [Retiree, carer of a dependent adult]*

*In my case, I am unable to return to work due to my son's extremely high needs so I believe case by case but cases like ours should be seen and paid as a job. So we would get paid for our hours we would have at least minimum wage, and we would be treated like employees not like beneficiaries. Once a doctor established our needs we would not have to access this every year we would be able to visit family members in Australia without having to report to someone. We would be free to hold our head up and feel like the extremely important job we are doing is acknowledged as a job and we are not unemployed or unemployable or receiving money as a token? No we do an extremely demanding and hard job that is exhausting (that's why it is hard to retain carers). We are getting penalised because we love our children and believe we are the best person to care for them especially when they are non-verbal like my son. It takes years to build up trust and an understanding of his unique way of communicating. [Caregiver of a dependent adult]*

Some respondents noted that there were inconsistencies around support for people caring for disabled people in different circumstances. There is support for someone caring for a partner who is on ACC but not for a partner who is on the Supported Living Payment.

## 7.6 Sole parents

Many respondents commented on difficulties with Sole Parent Support: having to reapply every twelve months was difficult for people who had become sole parents under traumatic circumstances; the requirement to return to work once the child reached a certain age was often difficult to meet; the abatement regime relating to the transition to part-time work, and from part-time to full-time work, was considered to be unnecessarily punitive; and the restriction to only one parent being able to access the benefit and the childcare subsidy was inequitable.

*Single parents working as many hours as they can with children under fourteen should still be allowed sole parent benefit and not be put on to unemployment benefit until children are of an age that they can go back to work. [Welfare recipient]*

*When there was a break up in my family between myself and my ex-partner I was given 30 days to find a job. The break up was traumatic on myself and our children and we did not need extra stress while finding our feet. [Welfare recipient]*

*The sole parent benefit being restricted to one parent, the first parent to attain it, is harmful to families. This first-past-the-post approach results in inequitable outcomes for the second parent even when they have 50:50 shared care. There are other benefits with this practice I understand (child care subsidy is one I think) and where this is the case this should also be reviewed. I've known of a number of parents that made settlements via the family court to be surprised at the end that the parent who had an increase in responsibility/care for the child was in a precarious position. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Shared care of children is discriminatory – only one person gets SPS (usually the mother). WFF can be split, but not benefit payments. [Wellington City Mission meeting]*

*DPB, (SPS) has been a disaster for New Zealand children. Since its inception, research has consistently shown that children born to solo mothers are vastly more likely to be abused, depressed, suicidal and eventually criminal. [A retiree]*

*The expectations don't match with the benefit being applied for. Someone receiving a sole parent benefit would be better off doing parenting courses, having better access to supportive agencies and learning how to be a parent rather than being expected to put their child in day care and find a job. Those parents who do find at least some work are penalised if it is not the minimum of twenty hours per week, it costs more than the free twenty hours' day care because of needing time to get to and from the place of employment. [Friend or family member of a welfare recipient]*

*Children need their mothers for as long as possible, and raising children is hard enough without having to work part-time as well. [NGO employee]*

Many respondents were of the view that child support payments from a non-custodial parent should be passed on to the parent caring for the child, rather than being retained by Work and Income to offset the cost of the welfare system.

*Allow sole parents on the benefit to receive child support paid by the non-custodial parent instead of paid to the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) to offset the Sole Parent Support benefit. [NGO employee]*

## 7.7 Treatment of relationships

A significant number of respondents felt strongly that the level of a person's income support should not be linked to whether they were single or in a relationship. Respondents felt strongly that people should be treated as individuals and not be penalised financially if they were in a relationship.

*And the 'de-facto' benefit really needs to be addressed. If I lived with a friend (both beneficiaries) we would get approx. \$100 per week more into the household total. Where a couple is supposed to save, that amount has yet to be explained to us. It still costs the same to feed, clothe, heat, wash, transport etc. two people, whether they are a couple or not. [Welfare recipient]*

*I'm aware that at the moment if a boyfriend/girlfriend live together and they are both beneficiaries if one gets a job they both lose the benefit. However if the one with the job earns the minimum wage then they are both worse off than on the benefit (especially if costs of working are taken into account). [Welfare recipient]*

*Taxed as an individual, supported as an individual. There should be no need to look at what a person's partner earns. [Past welfare recipient]*

*We support the change of couple rates from being lower than those of sole parents to being the same. Strong family relationships are important for children and the current system penalises couples. [Methodist Alliance]*

*References to relationships need to be removed from all benefits immediately so that those on a benefit receive it without any one prying into their relationship status. [Past welfare recipient]*

Many respondents considered that people's benefit entitlements should not be determined by their relationship status.

*The welfare system in New Zealand should aim to treat beneficiaries as individuals and separate one's relationships status from determining their benefit level. Giving individuals their own income and financial means allows beneficiaries to live in dignity and have an active role in their own self-determination. [AAAP]*

*Taxing beneficiaries as couples forces them into income dependence, can lock people into toxic relationships, and does not allow the financial independence of modern couples. [Unite Union]*

Respondents felt very strongly that the relationship provision was particularly inappropriate for people with a disability or chronic illness, for women and for single parents.

*Please change the policy around relationships. It impacts people with disabilities, women and single parents the most, and it's completely unacceptable. We cannot lose our autonomy just because we enter a relationship. We should retain our entitlement to support. [Welfare recipient]*

*In cases where someone with mental health issues is in a relationship but unable to work, you should not just leave the partner to pull the weight. The mental strain on both parties can make it worse. [Family member of a welfare recipient]*

*People who are chronically ill should not stop receiving their benefits when they enter a relationship. Our cities' rental prices are fundamentally skewed to multiple income rentals. It is all but impossible to support two adults on one wage. [A friend or family member or a welfare recipient]*

*People on supported living allowance because they are too unwell to work should not lose their benefit when they get into a relationship with a working partner, because if that working partner has a low paying job then the other party has to suffer. Why should the sick person's independence be taken away like that?*  
[Welfare recipient]

*Make it like ACC, when you have a disability it is so much harder to gain employment and you should still be entitled to an income, regardless of husband/partner earnings.* [Past welfare recipient]

A few respondents considered the level of benefit granted should take a partner's income into account.

*Being in a relationship in the nature of marriage must always be a factor as a partner's income should be taken into account for benefit purposes even if nothing else.* [MSD employee]

## 7.8 Indexation

The Social Security Act 2018, s453, requires benefit levels to be adjusted annually in line with the Consumer Price Index, excluding cigarettes and other tobacco products. In spite of this requirement, quite a few respondents suggested that an annual cost of living adjustment should be applied to benefit levels.

*Benefits need to increase to absorb growing costs of fuel which drives up costs of food and increasing rent and power prices.* [Welfare recipient]

Others suggested that benefit rates should be indexed to the average wage in the same way that New Zealand Superannuation is indexed.

*CPI indexing alone has been one reason beneficiaries and low-income working families keep falling further behind average living standards.* [NGO employee]

*Index all benefits to the average wage.* [Welfare recipient]

*There is a serious need for the government to address issues of benefit adequacy. The adequacy issues arise out of (1) the benefit cuts, forced on beneficiaries via assertions of an unsustainable long-term fiscal situation in the early 1990s and (2) subsequent linkage, at best, of components of the benefit system to the consumer price index. As living standards for working New Zealanders have improved with productivity growth, relative living standards for those temporarily or more permanently supported by a benefit have significantly declined. Thus, the fruits of economic growth have not been shared with beneficiaries. Rather, the fiscal savings so generated have gone into income tax cuts, especially at the upper end of the distribution.* [Institute for Governance and Policy Studies]

Respondents suggested various options for indexing: 75–80 percent of minimum wage; at least 50 percent of the minimum wage for a forty-hour week; some other proportion of the average wage; or 10 percent below New Zealand Superannuation rates.

*Ensure all benefits and Working For Families Tax Credits are indexed annually to prices and wages. Substantially improve core benefits. Immediately increase all core benefits by at least 20 percent.* [Child Poverty Action Group]

*Implement full annual indexation for all WFF rates and abatement thresholds and introduce a link to wage growth for WFF and benefits as is done for New Zealand Superannuation.* [NGO employee]

## 7.9 Asset Testing

Many respondents stated that beneficiaries should be able to have savings without it affecting their benefit entitlements. They argued that people who have savings should not be penalised for being responsible with their money; if someone lost their job or became too ill to work, they should have the same access to benefits as a person with no savings.

*When I resigned from the Fire Service for medical reasons, I was given a gift (gratuity) as a way of thanks for my thirty years of service. As I was unfit for work, I had to go on a sickness benefit and WINZ stole my gift off me stating that it was income. If I had known WINZ were going to steal my gratuity, I would have arranged for it not to have been given to me. [Welfare recipient]*

*Beneficiaries should be able to have some savings (and indeed encouraged to have some) to cover emergencies such as dental treatment, car and house repairs. Avoids them having to either apply for emergency benefits which then have to be paid back reducing their benefit or borrowing from a high-cost money lender. Perhaps an individual savings limit of \$2,000 (at least) and family limit of \$5,000 before benefit is affected. The amount of savings you can have before accommodation benefit is affected hasn't increased for years and this needs to be addressed. [Individual respondent]*

*Please don't punish people for having savings and expecting them to use it before asking for welfare. [Past welfare recipient]*

*If by some chance a beneficiary is able to save towards improving their situation, it should not affect their benefit entitlements. Having a limit entraps persons into a world of no hope. This would have far-reaching benefits as the able if not currently employed would better be able to lift themselves out of poverty by working towards a goal, that is, reliable car, more stable housing/house deposit. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Expand and include beneficiaries into Kiwisaver – this should not be optional. Everyone should have a basic saving scheme – give incentives to beneficiaries who open savings accounts for themselves and their children. [NGO employee]*

## 8 Other assistance

This section covers what we heard regarding the Working For Families tax credits (WFF), as well as other forms of assistance that can be received in addition to the main benefits – Accommodation Supplement, Disability Allowance, Child Disability Allowance, Childcare Assistance and Hardship Assistance.

### 8.1 Working for Families Tax Credits

The majority of respondents confined their remarks to the benefit system without mentioning WFF tax credits.

Of those who did comment specifically on welfare delivered through the taxation system, many expressed appreciation for the tax credits, and the Best Start tax credit introduced in July 2018.

*Family tax credits are amazing, always helpful to have that little extra help!* [Friend or family member of a welfare recipient]

*Working For Families benefits a lot of middle class families who struggle in today's economy (though more could be done for people in this bracket).* [Past welfare recipient]

Some suggested changes to the level of assistance, or the eligibility criteria.

*Entrenched stigma and bias against single parents, for example, working for families work requirement for single parents is twenty hours per week but for couples it is an average of fifteen hours per week (much easier for couples as they have each other to help). This work requirement should be the other way around.* [Past welfare recipient]

*Remove the hours of paid work criteria from Working For Families – In Work Tax Credit and extend to all low income families.* [NGO employee]

Some were concerned about inequities between the assistance available to beneficiaries and working people on low incomes.

*A persistent and damaging focus on paid work as the priority over providing care for young children has meant that the children of beneficiary families and those with insufficient hours of paid work receive less in weekly WFF tax credits than others on low incomes.* [NGO employee]

*All beneficiaries should receive the working for families in work payment immediately as it is unfair and discriminatory that this is withheld from the parents of the poorest children who need this money the most.* [Past welfare recipient]

Others commented on the abatement rate for WFF, and the interaction between abatements for WFF and Best Start.

*Reset Working for Families abatement rate to 20 percent. Every extra dollar a family earns over the current fixed threshold reduces their WFF tax credits far too sharply leading to negative impacts for "working" poor families.* [NGO employee]

*Make the new Best Start payment for babies a part of WFF to save unnecessary expense and overlapping abatement effects. While Best Start is a child-centred policy that acknowledges the importance of early childhood, it is made complex by overlapping abatements. Currently Best Start, from \$79,000, abates at 20.8 percent on top of the 25 percent abatement of WFF. It would be better if integrated into the WFF package. [NGO employee]*

## 8.2 Accommodation Supplement

A significant number of respondents advocated an increase in the level of the Accommodation Supplement (AS), with many noting that the level had not kept up with the increase in accommodation costs in recent years.

*Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment (MBIE) collect rent data which suggests that the rent for a three-bedroom house across all of New Zealand rose 43 percent over the last ten years, exactly the same as wages. All this points to increasing financial hardship for tenant households, yet the main housing support programme – the Accommodation Supplement – is still based on rents as set by government over ten years ago. [Student]*

Options suggested included setting the AS at a percentage of the cost of rent or at a level to ensure that housing costs are no more than 35 percent of people's net income. It was also suggested that it needed to cover all reasonable rent costs.

*I believe the accommodation allowance should be a percentage of the cost of rent. For example, in Christchurch it is extremely difficult to find a two bedroom flat within the price cap WINZ said they will approve. [Welfare recipient]*

*Accommodation supplement needs to increase dramatically. I got a \$20 increase, but my rent has since gone up by \$40. [Welfare recipient]*

*The accommodation supplement and benefits rates are not covering the basics. Landlords' rents need capping. [Past welfare recipient]*

There was also a suggestion that the AS could be indexed to housing and rental costs, not wages, and allow for regional variation; noting that there has been a thirteen-year gap in indexation of the AS.

Some respondents proposed phasing out the AS over time, which would then free up funding to put into providing more state housing. The suggestion was made that the use of the AS should be reduced over time by shifting housing assistance into higher Working for Families (WFF) tax credits and benefits.

*For low-income working families, WFF and AS abatements compound to reduce the extra value of every dollar earned by a combined 50 percent in addition to taxation and other compulsory payments such as for student loans. The AS is not indexed, so it reduces in real value as housing and other costs rise. More reliance on other mechanisms such as WFF and benefit levels can improve sensitivity to household size and need. [An employee]*

*Over time, reduce the use of the Accommodation Supplement (AS) by shifting housing assistance into higher Working for Families (WFF) tax credits and benefits. [Child Poverty Action Group]*

Some respondents considered the cost of housing should be included in the main benefit and queried why it was being treated as an add-on through the AS.

Some made the comment that the AS zones should be the same across New Zealand.

*Accommodation supplement being confined to areas thus enabling more inequity.*  
[Welfare recipient]

Other respondents were of the view the AS is making housing more costly and benefitting owners of rental property.

*Our system actually subsidises private landlords and private employers – with things like the accommodation supplement, landlords simply raise their price to match every cent they can take from you, and the support ends up useless because it goes straight from the government to the landlord rather than helping the person who needs it.* [Welfare recipient]

*Increases in the Accommodation Supplement have led to a parallel increase in rents. Thus this sort of intervention has not adequately improved the overall financial situation of renters.* [Past welfare recipient]

There was little comment on the Income Related Rent Subsidy. A few people noted that it was not available for the private rental market.

*The IRRS system is great for those who can access it, but there are many people who do not have affordable housing because of the limited number of IRRS properties available.* [NGO employee]

## 8.3 Disability Allowance

The Disability Allowance is currently capped at \$63.22 per week. Many respondents noted that while this is adequate for some people, it falls severely short of meeting most people's needs. A significant number of respondents advocated an increase in the level of the Disability Allowance. People also noted there should be an allowance for non-medication treatments for things such as physiotherapy, hydrotherapy, massage, supplements, acupuncture, specialty food, dieticians or anything else prescribed as necessary treatments by the beneficiary's GP or specialist. Others felt that some mental health conditions needed greater levels of support.

*For those who must live alone due to a medical condition such as OCDs, schizophrenia, personality disorder or psychosis with paranoid features, it becomes a human rights issue around the use of Disability Allowance to cover the costs of living alone. This is not currently allowable, but should be if it is attested by psychiatric review.* [Comcare Trust]

*Making it easier for people to access disability allowance for counselling costs or creating a separate grant for this to destigmatise it and support people to access the mental health care they deserve.* [Past welfare recipient]

*It would be fantastic if I didn't have to beg to get help with my counselling costs. I already have extra medical costs; adding counselling on top is very difficult for me.*  
[Welfare recipient]

*My Disability Allowance is paid at the maximum rate but does not cover all approved costs relating to it. If I did not have some capital of my own, I would not be able to pay for very necessary physiotherapy treatments, for instance. In contrast to me a blind friend receives Individualised Funding through the Health Department, which enables him to manage targeted funds to pay for various aspects of his care and very necessary equipment, which has changed his life, very much for the better.*  
[Welfare recipient]

Respondents recommended changing the Disability Allowance so that it covers actual additional costs, or making these things free to Community Services Card holders. A small number argued for payments to be more aligned with those available to people with similar conditions who are covered by ACC to provide equity for people in similar circumstances.

Some respondents noted that the payment level was not enough, that it was hard to understand how it was calculated and that the fortnightly payment was not frequent enough.

It was noted that in some cases where there were infrequent large payments such as for doctors' visits, it was unrealistic to expect people to save the small fortnightly Disability Allowance payments.

*The disability allowance is not fit for purpose. If the patient is funded for doctor visits, then Work and Income should send the money to the practice providing the service, similarly for the costs of prescriptions. Drip feeding weekly amounts of money to poor people and expecting them to save them up to pay these expenses does not work. The administrative costs of providing small sums of money supported by the collection of receipts are probably higher than the amount of money given to the patient. [Primary Healthcare Provider]*

Several respondents suggested that consideration should be given to funding companion animals.

*The Disability Allowance should cover every living requirement especially people on medicals as life is already very hard and stressful; a lot of us are isolated and have pets as our only company, so I would like to see a provision for that in the payments. [Disabled welfare recipient]*

## 8.4 Child Disability Allowance

Some respondents referred to the Child Disability Allowance, noting they appreciated that it was not means tested and was a universal benefit with minimal compliance requirements. Others considered it was ridiculous to have to reapply every year for a lifelong condition.

*For me, it's about how people with disabilities are treated, and their carers. Having to apply for the Child Disability Allowance every year for a lifelong condition is just ridiculous, and the payment doesn't make sense. \$92 a fortnight for what? It doesn't cover the loss of my income from having to stay home with a disabled child. It barely covers our transport costs. People talk about introducing a UBI, they should start with kids with disabilities. Imagine if we had enough to cover speech therapy, OTs, transport, home modifications, teacher aides – instead of all these different sources, just one UBI payment. Then maybe they wouldn't end up on a benefit as adults. [A sole parent or sole caregiver to dependent children]*

A small number of people felt the Child Disability Allowance should be more individualised rather than universal.

*The Child Disability Allowance shouldn't be a set rate. It should be customised to the child it is given for. [Parent]*

The value of the allowance has been eroded for the most vulnerable families as it is counted as income for the purpose of means testing Temporary Additional Support.

## 8.5 Childcare Assistance

Many respondents commented that the practice of allowing only one parent in a shared custody arrangement to receive childcare assistance was inequitable and could put a strain on the relationship between the parents. Some thought there should be more support available.

*We need to be more supportive of families that have shared care of children. It is unfair that only one parent is able to apply for Childcare, CDA and so on. [MSD employee]*

*I think that if two parents have shared care (in particular 50/50) and both parents are on benefits, there should not be a "primary caregiver" in their system, as this only allows one parent to access childcare subsidy and the parent on jobseeker is no longer entitled to any top ups to include the child in their care every other week. [A friend or family member of a welfare recipient]*

*Access to childcare for parents returning to work or to higher education. Further support for single parents who have a non-custodial parent that does not pay child support. [Past welfare recipient]*

*More provision for those who are working in terms of childcare and care for children in school holidays. [NGO employee]*

*More help for the low to middle income working families, better OSCAR subsidies. I work a full-time job, but in the school holidays I am left with \$50 after I have paid the school holiday programme. I know I am not the only person in this situation. [Past welfare recipient]*

A few respondents took a different view.

*People who are not working should not get free childcare! You do not need childcare if you do not have a job! [Friend or family of welfare recipient]*

### **Other support**

Some respondents were happy with the provision of paid parental leave.

*As a recipient of maternity leave payments, I am grateful for the increases, both recent and prospective, in the duration of the payments. [Welfare recipient]*

## 8.6 Hardship assistance

Hardship assistance is available to help people with immediate needs and essential costs. It is income and asset tested to ensure it is closely targeted to those most in need. Temporary Additional Support is available for people with an ongoing need for additional assistance. Special Needs Grants, Benefit Advance Payments, and Recoverable Assistance Payments are one-off costs.

*Benefit and tax credit levels have been too low to support families. The need for hardship grants from Work and Income, particularly for food and housing, has soared over the past few years. Thousands of parents have been forced into debt to meet their families' basic needs or to pay an emergency bill, or they have relied on charity to ensure children are fed and clothed. The Families Package delivers well under what is needed. [An employee]*

### Temporary Additional Support

Temporary Additional Support is a payment of last resort to help people with regular essential living costs that cannot be met from their income or assets. The support lasts for thirteen weeks but may be reapplied for every thirteen weeks if still needed. This support is available to people on a main benefit and for non-beneficiaries on very low incomes.

Some respondents noted that for someone receiving Temporary Additional Support, any additional income they earned was abated dollar for dollar against the amount of support received. This did not provide any incentive for them to enter part-time, low-wage work.

*The Child Disability Allowance (for children with ongoing high-level needs) is not income tested, thus even Members of Parliament can receive this should their children need such care. However, those most in hardship (by definition, those receiving TAS) have the CDA included as income in TAS calculations. This is perverse. [Benefit Rights Service]*

In addition, they also noted an increase in benefit levels simply meant a corresponding reduction in the amount of Temporary Additional Support provided.

*If possible a "whole person" approach. Combining base benefits and TAS to become the new base benefit wouldn't cost much and would incentivise part-time work to improve personal outcomes. The income abatement rates wouldn't have to change then. An amended TAS would still need to be available for extreme hardship, but the criteria should be very tight and rigorous. Reconfigured amounts would reduce the working public backlash about dole bludgers. [Welfare recipient]*

*Benefit increases came in, but temporary additional support thresholds weren't increased so increases just became a reallocation of entitlements for many. [Past welfare recipient]*

Some respondents mentioned that the need to reapply every thirteen weeks, even though their circumstances hadn't changed, was unduly onerous.

## Special Needs Grants

Many respondents considered the amounts available for food and clothing grants in a six-month period were too low and that the income and asset thresholds for access to these grants were also too low.

*The max allowance (\$200) of emergency food payments in a six-month period. I am unable to afford food after my basic bills are paid out. Making \$200 of food last six months is impossible, also I was not told of this limitation at the time, so I somehow have to get through the next three months without food.*  
[Welfare recipient]

*The limit of three food parcel cards/top-ups per year seems way too limiting – and if there is some discretion which WINZ can apply, it appears not to be applied.*  
[Citizens Advice Bureau]

Various respondents stated that more grant assistance is needed for one-off expenses such as home maintenance work bills, insurance, dental services, eye specialists and vehicle repairs.

*WINZ only allows a budget of \$250 for glasses – you then end up with crappy cheap glasses frames made out of copper which turn green over time.*  
[Welfare recipient]

Some respondents appreciated being able to apply for an advance on the benefit, or for some other non-recoverable assistance.

*Being able to apply for an advance is essentially a no-interest loan and allows a beneficiary the opportunity to “manage” their income against their outgoings.* [Past welfare recipient]

Another respondent praised the Collections Unit.

*There are regulations in place to ensure there is no interest or penalty fees added to Work and Income debt and the Collections Unit make sure that a repayment arrangement is affordable, or place repayments on hold when it's not. And the hours they're open are great.* [Past welfare recipient]

## Recoverable Assistance Payments

This payment is available to non-beneficiaries, with income thresholds.

It was suggested there should be an increase in the threshold for Recoverable Assistance Payments because of the high cost of accommodation.

*Nowadays people are struggling to get assistance from banks etc. if they are over the income limit for RAPS – we are driving people into the hands of finance companies and causing long-term problems.* [MSD employee]

## 9 Work focus and incentives

### 9.1 Abatement

The current benefit abatement thresholds – the amount of weekly income that can be earned before a benefit is reduced – are \$80 for Jobseeker Support and \$100 for Sole Parent Support and Supported Living Payment.

The abatement rate is the rate at which a benefit is reduced for each dollar of additional income earned by a beneficiary. The rate of abatement for Jobseeker Support is 70 percent – this means that for every \$1 earned over \$80, the net benefit payment is reduced by 70 cents. The abatement rate for Sole Parent Support and Supported Living Payment is 30 percent for income between \$100 and \$200, and 70 percent for income over \$200.

Many respondents argued for an increase in abatement thresholds and for much lower rates of abatement, noting that the amount a beneficiary can earn before their benefit is affected hasn't changed for a very long time. Some suggested the abatement threshold should be expressed as a certain number of hours at the minimum wage, say eight, ten or twelve hours.

*The amount deducted from the benefit when beginning work is too steep to keep people in work, if they can make more on the benefit than in work, then incentive to work is lessened. [Friend/family member of welfare recipient]*

*The abatement rate has not been adjusted for years. Increase the threshold for income earned while on benefit. [Invercargill community forum]*

*Ideally low-income workers should have the lowest effective tax rate, not the highest. Lowering the abatement is a fantastic way to incentivise work and increase the dignity of the system ... If the Tax Working Group does not treat abatement rates as a tax, they will set the wrong tax rates for low income individuals. Low income individuals already face an effective tax rate of 70percent through the abatement system. [Student]*

*Benefits abate far too sharply from a very low income level of \$80–\$100 per week. The income levels have not been indexed and are largely unchanged from the 1980s. Each person in a couple on a benefit should have their own individual level of income before abatement. Currently the couple can only have \$80 between them. [NGO employee]*

*I am on Supported Living (both mental and physical health reasons) and work variable hours each week. For the past twelve years, I have done up to fifteen hours per week (because of the WINZ limits). Currently doing a six-month trial to see if I can manage to support myself however my GP does not want me to permanently work thirty hours plus. At my age (55) and pay scale (between the minimum wage and the living wage), it is not realistic to expect to be able to completely support myself. However WINZ does not have a category which allows me to work more than fifteen hours but less than thirty without being financially worse off. [Welfare recipient]*

*Income abatement levels should be raised, and calculated on net earnings, not gross, being deducted from the net benefit. [Welfare recipient]*

There was also general agreement among respondents that the existing abatement rates are a disincentive to people going into work. Respondents felt that the system seems punitive towards part-time workers due to high effective marginal tax rates, and the high compliance costs in reporting changes in earnings are a significant disincentive to taking up or maintaining part-time work.

*Abatement rates do not incentivise beneficiaries to explore work options. They act as a barrier to entering or contemplating work opportunities. [NGO employee]*

In addition, the abatement rates were seen as placing limitations and restricting choices for disabled people who can't work full time due to an injury or disability.

*As someone who can't work a full-time job due to an injury/disability, I find it appalling that there is NO encouragement for people like myself to work part time, at least. I like to work, to contribute, to try to better my life and my families. As a beneficiary, I can only earn \$80/wk BEFORE tax, making the little I do earn so significantly small it becomes barely worth working at all. After WINZ and IRD take their "share", I am left earning about 30c/hour. [Welfare recipient]*

There was recognition that the welfare system needs to be able to respond better to fluctuating income from part-time and casual work to remove barriers to work and to address concerns about the impact of hours of work on people's incomes.

## 9.2 Sanctions

Income support recipients have general obligations to meet. These include the general obligation of advising Work and Income of any changes to their circumstances that affect their entitlements, as well as participation in a Work Ability Assessment, or having children enrolled with a GP, where these are relevant.

Recipients of the main benefits can be sanctioned by having their benefit reduced, or stopped entirely, if they fail to meet any of their work or other obligations.

A large number of respondents advocated the removal of benefit sanctions, seeing them as punitive, causing injustice and hardship and punishing the most vulnerable in our society.

*As a youth health nurse, I have seen the negative impact sanctions are having on the physical and mental health of rangatahi. I see young people who are already experiencing low mood and anxiety facing increased stress as they are forced to jump through hoops to meet their obligations of a work-seekers benefit, obligations which have no evidence to indicate they have any benefit in supporting young people into employment. [Past welfare recipient]*

*The biggest concern with not imposing s70a reductions is that it will impact mothers naming the fathers, and that really needs to sit with IRD and they can follow up if there is a flow-on impact of parents not naming the other parent. [Past welfare recipient]*

*It is pleasing that changes to the way sanctions are imposed in 2018 led to a 39 percent reduction for sole parents, nevertheless in the June 2018 quarter alone, 3,371 sanctions were still applied to beneficiaries with dependent children. [An employee]*

A great many felt very strongly that there should not be sanctions where children were involved because of the negative impact on the ability of parents to provide a good standard of living for their children.

*Immediately abolish benefit sanctions where the beneficiary is the primary caregiver of dependent children. These sanctions are harmful to children, and they perpetuate a blameful, stigmatising narrative around sole parents and welfare recipients, while benefit levels are already inadequate for families. [NGO employee]*

*Remove sanctions for parents caring for children: sanctions are a punitive measure that offers no advantage to the children who are impacted by the sanction. A child-centred approach would not punish children by seeing minimal family income further reduced through a sanction. [Birthright]*

*The welfare system is designed to help people live, who can't help themselves or who have fallen on hard times. It is NOT designed as a tool to punish anyone – least of all the children who are often the ones hurt by sanctions. [Welfare recipient]*

*Sanctions affect not only beneficiaries, but their families, children and communities ... and can increase the pressures that already exist for vulnerable people. [Unite union]*

*Sanctions don't take into account people's lives – pressure to do something (meeting/training/appointment) and no consideration for what else is going on in life and if it's the day before pay day no money for travel. [Greymouth Community Forum]*

Many respondents were of the view that sanctions do not achieve their goals and have been proven to be ineffective.

*Penalties are punitive and unfair and are not effective in changing the behaviour of welfare recipients. [Past welfare recipient]*

*Incentives for paid employment are also important – how do we overcome the sanctions? They are a way of forcing people into poverty and out of the benefit system. Overseas evidence indicates they are particularly unhelpful as incentives to get people into jobs. They just increase poverty. [Wellington Roundtable meeting]*

*Sanctions are a really bad way to manage behaviour. They tend to punish the vulnerable the most and reinforce the idea that life is outside your control (especially to those who are not the direct recipient, for example, children). [Past welfare recipient]*

While some recipients supported regular drug testing, others considered that the practice should be abolished and a more supportive approach taken, for example, regarding it as a health issue and providing support for people to give up taking drug.

## 9.3 Stand-down periods

Most main benefits have an initial stand-down period (or non-entitlement period) where people do not receive a benefit payment. This is usually one or two weeks after a benefit has been granted. The stand-down period can be thirteen weeks if a person voluntarily left their job or were dismissed for misconduct. In some circumstances, there is no stand-down period.

Many respondents argued that stand-down periods should be reduced or removed altogether. They considered stand-down periods can create further financial hardship while assistance is being applied for and this often has a negative impact on families and children.

*Remove stand-down periods for people in extreme hardship (homeless through no fault of their own, empty bank accounts, etc.).* [Past welfare recipient]

*Statutory stand-down periods – this is an outdated piece of legislation and puts people into further financial hardship from the get go. A lot of the time further financial hardship stems from this stand-down period and snowballs.* [MSD employee]

*Stand-downs – these can result in significant harm to children. Parents/caregivers are not able to provide their children with their basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. These can result in families/whānau taking on high-interest loans, getting additional bank charges and dishonour fees and missing out on early payment discounts.* [NGO employee]

*99 percent of stand downs shouldn't exist.* [Rotorua Community Forum]

*That harsh and punitive stand-down provisions be abolished particularly the draconian thirteen week stand-down period for a worker's eligibility to a benefit and sanctions on sole parents, who fail to identify who is in law the other parent, must be repealed as a matter of urgency.* [NZ Council of Trade Unions]

Some respondents commented on the existing stand-down provision of thirteen weeks, if the person left their job voluntarily or was dismissed for misconduct, and expressed the view that there may be valid reasons to leave employment.

*Readdress the STAND-DOWN PERIOD. It is way too stressful for some families; it should be on a case-by-case situation, especially if a person leaves their employment due to bullying, that is, he or she has a family and the work place is deemed not a good place to work and the situation can't be resolved and he or she feels they have no other options but to walk out of their employment obligations.* [Welfare recipient]

*Misconduct is often disputed by personal grievance and penalising people by way of income deprivation for reasons that may later be overturned or for behaviour later justified or explainable is simply cruel. Even if dismissal for misconduct was upheld, it should not result in total income deprivation.* [NZ Council of Trade Unions]

## 10 Conclusion

Many respondents expressed their appreciation of the opportunity to have their say about the current welfare system and the quality of the engagement.

*Brilliant initiative. I went to the WEAG forum in Nelson. Excellent panel. Excellent turnout. Very caring participants. Excellent responses and comments.*  
[Welfare recipient]

Many people identified issues with the current system, and a vision for what a better system might look like, and some made concrete recommendations for change as outlined in earlier sections of this report. A few commented on system reform and welfare reform in particular, as set out below.

### 10.1 The current reform of the welfare system

Many respondents had high expectations of the current reform process.

*The current system has a lot to improve. We have to reform it to break the cycle of poverty. As it is at the moment people can't do anything and become hopeless and worse off ... I'm so grateful you are doing this review, it is essential to make strong recommendations and that these be implemented. Without these necessary changes, our society will fall apart in intergenerational consequences and ruin every level of our society. Here's our chance to make positive reform.* [Welfare recipient]

Respondents overwhelmingly pointed to the need to create a system that is simplified so that it is comprehensible, easier to navigate and operates more efficiently.

Some felt that the system needed to be developed through a co-design process with Māori, as described in sections 3.2 and 4 above, and with those the system is intended to work for.

*We must ensure with this reform, that a new social security system is co-designed with the community it serves, to cause no more distress through treatment, or administrative stress of procedure, for our poorest, and particularly among them – please do not forget how disproportionately represented they are among them – those with mental illness and/or suffering from addiction.* [Welfare recipient, sole parent]

*Children and young people should have the opportunity to directly influence the shaping of a reformed social welfare system, consistent with their Article 12 UN CRC participation right.* [Barnados]

Some said it was confusing and hard to make sense of labels like MSD, Work and Income, (WINZ) and Community Link. It was suggested that an overhauled welfare system, and its components, should be renamed in a way that made more sense from a public perspective.

### 10.2 Future reform of the welfare system

Respondents noted the complexity of factors and policies affecting people's wellbeing and the need for welfare support. While appreciating the current welfare reform exercise, they were mindful that there needs to be ongoing maintenance and review to ensure that the system can accommodate rapidly changing social and economic changes and remain fit for purpose.

## Periodic Review

Some respondents called for regular, periodic independent reviews, with government being required to implement the recommendations of any review.

*An independent, regular periodic review of the social welfare system should be legislated as a specific requirement in the Social Security Act 2018, with the independent reviewers having power to scrutinise all aspects of the social welfare system; including mandatory assessment of:*

- *how the welfare system is working for children, young people, families and whānau (including its impact on poverty alleviation)*
  - *how the social welfare system's functioning in light of New Zealand's international human rights obligations*
  - *how culturally inclusive the social welfare system is, and to what extent it is upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi in practice*
  - *an assessment of the income adequacy provided through the social welfare system, in light of current day conditions and social and economic realities.*
- [Barnados (paraphrased)]

## Taking a whole-of-government perspective

A number of respondents felt that policies in other areas were contributing strongly to the need for welfare support, the hardship people experience while on welfare support, and the difficulties people experience becoming independent of welfare support.

*I think many of these people have become trapped because of a series of bad policy decision from various governments (criminalising drugs, prevalence of gambling/pokie machines, immigration policy driving down wages and increasing housing costs, penalising beneficiaries instead of helping them, lots of "neo-liberal" reforms cutting government programmes). I think we need to treat people with respect and use more carrots and fewer sticks; more encouragement and less punishment. [Individual respondent]*

Some suggested that any reform of the welfare system must intentionally explore how the system can become more practically interconnected across child and family support, disability support, education, housing, justice, labour markets, state care of children and the tax system.

## Longer-term agenda

Some respondents saw a need for long-standing inequities to be addressed, but saw this as beyond the scope of the immediate review.

*WEAG also needs to encourage government to start addressing the existing inequities between ACC and Ministry of Health when it comes to funding disability support services and associated income support and compensation payments through appointing a Royal Commission as a first step. [Welfare recipient, disabled]*

Recognising the complexity of the system, and the likely cost of significant improvements, some respondents urged bold long-term action.

*Please establish the bold targets for a time for all New Zealanders are provided with a universal minimum wage or a universal living support amount – just as we have established for people over sixty-five years old. We know we can do it – it needs political will and some dedicated civil servants to implement it. [Past welfare recipient, retiree]*

## 10.3 Next steps

This summary suggests a high degree of consensus on key issues and a desire for a future welfare system that ensures that the wellbeing of children is prioritised; people are treated with kindness, compassion and respect for their dignity; no one has to live in poverty; and people are well-supported to become independent to the fullest extent possible.

Diverse views on more specific issues suggest a range of options that will be considered by the Welfare Expert Advisory Group in the preparation of its advice and recommendations to government.

This summary also provides a longer-term resource that can inform future work and can be tracked back to the original submissions as required.

# Appendix 1: Overview of consultation process

## Submissions

A submission form was developed comprising five key questions:

1. What's working well?
2. What's not working well?
3. What could be done better?
4. What level of support should be available through the welfare system?
5. What are the values that should underpin the welfare system?

Respondents were also encouraged to raise anything else they thought relevant to the Welfare Expert Advisory Group's (WEAG) work.

Members of the public were able to respond to these questions through an online survey using Survey Monkey. They could also complete paper submissions, which were made available at consultation meetings. Some people and organisations chose to write directly to WEAG, sending their views via email or post. We received 1,348 submissions, most of which (990) were through Survey Monkey.

## Representation

Demographic data from paper surveys was rarely provided. The most comprehensive data was provided in submission made through the online process using Survey Monkey, and is outlined below.

Relatively few young people participated in the Survey Monkey process, but otherwise, there was a good spread of respondents across age groups.

Age group	Number of submissions	Percentage
<18	1	0%
18–24	39	4%
25–34	157	16%
35–44	215	22%
45–54	256	26%
55–64	215	22%
65+	94	9%

Respondents were predominantly female, with 23 percent being male and 2 percent (23) identified as gender-diverse.

Respondents were ethnically diverse, based on responses who provided their ethnicity. People identifying as being Māori or part-Māori being particularly well-represented. The table below shows the main ethnicities identified, but it should be noted that people could select multiple ethnicities.

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
NZ European/Pākehā/European	763	77%
Māori	231	23%
Pacific People	49	5%
Asian	16	2%

We asked respondents in what capacity they were making their submission. Again, it was possible to tick more than one box, and some submitters chose not to tick any boxes.

Submitter type	Number
a current welfare recipient	411
a previous recipient of welfare assistance	322
a friend or family member of a welfare recipient	298
an employee of the Ministry of Social Development	55
an employee of another government Ministry, Department, Agency or Crown Entity	53
an employee of a social service provider or a non governmental organisation (NGO)	151
none of the above	128
an employer	64
an employee	378
an unemployed person	226
a retiree	90
a student	87
none of the above	254
a sole parent or sole caregiver to dependent children	151
a parent or caregiver to dependent children	185
a caregiver to a dependent adult	63
someone with a disability	287
none of the above	565

### Confidentiality

Some respondents expressed concern about possible repercussions resulting from being critical of the system. Almost two-thirds (59 percent) chose not to provide their names, and more than a third (37 percent) explicitly requested that their submission be treated as confidential.

## Face-to-face consultation

WEAG members wanted to hear from as wide a cross section of New Zealanders as possible in the time available. There were five broad types of face-to-face engagement sessions, which were designed to allow people to speak freely and to have their views heard by the Advisory Group.

- 18 community forums – open to the public, involving over 800 participants
- 18 provider forums, involving over 300 participants
- 5 focus groups with Work and Income clients (34 participants)
- 9 focus groups with Work and Income staff (114 participants)
- 2 roundtable meetings with academics and other subject-matter specialists in Wellington and Auckland
- a national hui with Oranga Tamariki contracted iwi providers

Meetings were held in the following locations:

- Greymouth
- Hastings
- Christchurch
- Auckland South
- Auckland West
- Nelson
- Gisborne
- Lower Hutt
- Porirua
- Newtown
- Dunedin
- Invercargill
- Rotorua
- Whangarei
- Kaitia
- Palmerston North
- Hamilton
- New Plymouth

## Appendix 2: **Groups and organisations that made written submissions**

Anglican Care South Canterbury  
Auckland Catholic Diocese  
Auckland Action Against Poverty  
Auckland Community Agencies  
Auckland North Community and Development  
Auckland Women's Centre  
Barnados  
Benefit Rights Service  
Birthright NZ  
Business Crisis Support NZ  
Camilla Watson MSD contractor  
Child Poverty Action Group & Action Station  
Child and Youth Friendly Christchurch Leadership Group  
Citizens Advice Bureau NZ  
Comcare Trust  
De Paul House  
Deaf Aotearoa  
Equally Well Collaborative  
Far North District Council  
Newtown Union Health Service  
Gisborne Budget Service  
Institute for Governance and Policy Studies  
IHC  
Job Connect Lower Hutt  
Leaderbrand  
Manaaki Ora Trust- Tipu Ora  
Methodist Alliance  
Mohua Social Services Charitable Trust  
MSD Building Financial Capability Team  
Palms Medical Centre, Palmerston North  
Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu  
NZ Association of Social Workers  
NZ Council Christian Social Services  
NZ Council of Trade Unions  
NZ Nurses Organisation  
NZ Taxpayers Union  
Office of the Children's Commissioner  
PSA  
SigJaws Trust  
Social Advocates New Zealand  
Society of St Vincent de Paul  
St Francis of Assisi Trust, Dunedin  
Unite Union  
Unitec Social Practice Pathway  
University of Auckland  
Women's Health Action Trust  
Wise Group  
Workwise

