



Employment Key Messages: May 2022

Date:	27 May 2022	Priority:	Routine
Security classification:	In Confidence	Tracking numbers:	MBIE:2122-4402 MSD: REP/22/5/454

Action sought		
	Action sought	Deadline
Hon Carmel Sepuloni Minister for Social Development and Employment	Note the attached Employment Key Messages for May 2022 Forward this briefing and report to the Associate Minister for Social Development and Employment	N/A

Contact for telephone discussion (if required)			
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The following departments/agencies have been consulted

Minister's office to complete:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Approved | <input type="checkbox"/> Declined |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Noted | <input type="checkbox"/> Needs change |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seen | <input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by Events |
| <input type="checkbox"/> See Minister's Notes | <input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn |

Comments



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Purpose

1. This is the May 2022 update to the Employment Key Messages.
2. The key topics for May 2022 are:
 - a. Labour market statistics remained resilient to the Omicron outbreak, although employment growth is slowing
 - b. Wages are growing with a tight labour market being one driver
 - c. Employers can access spare capacity to address labour shortages.
3. We welcome your feedback on this regular briefing. We anticipate that the extent of changes to this briefing will vary in the future, depending on new data releases. The next report will be provided by **23 June 2022**.

Nicholas Green,
Manager, Labour Market Policy and Performance Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
27/05/2022

Rob Porter
Manager, Labour Market Intelligence Ministry of Social Development
27/05/2022



Employment Key Messages

Current Version	27 May 2022
Next Version	23 June 2022
Note	The statistical information about labour market performance (such as the Household Labour Force Survey) tends to be volatile, especially around economic shocks. It therefore needs to be interpreted with caution, looking across a wide range of sources to understand the underlying trends (rather than focusing on quarterly changes).

Upcoming Data Releases

Weekly income support update	Every Friday
Monthly Labour Market Fact Sheet	20 June 2022
Monthly Benefits Update	17 June 2022

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Key messages for May 2022

- 1. The recent labour market statistics showed the labour market remained resilient** over the quarter while Omicron cases peaked across New Zealand. Other than an increase in workers reporting being away from work due to sickness, Omicron had little effects on overall labour market outcomes in the March 2022 quarter.
- 2. However, employment growth has slowed.** While the headline unemployment rate remained unchanged at 3.2 percent, growth in the number of people employed remains lower than in March 2021. Employment growth will likely continue to remain below 2021 levels as softening economic conditions are expected.
- 3. Wages are rising, with labour market tightness being one driver.** The wage increases have not kept up with the cost of living, and firms are reporting further price rises are likely. Households are facing a loss in real incomes as rises in the cost of living are higher.
- 4. There are areas of spare capacity in the labour market giving employers options to address labour market tightness.** There remains a pool of underutilised workers who are wanting more hours of work. Some of the tightness may also be alleviated from the immigration rebalance, although we expect the return of workers to be slow over the next few years. Education and training pathways are a third option for employers.
- 5. Economic headwinds are emerging, creating risks for the labour market.** Internationally, these headwinds include geopolitical uncertainty, supply-chain disruptions, slow-downs in trading partners. Domestically, rising interest rates and declining house prices may curb consumer spending.
- 6. The impacts of the border reopening on the labour market will depend on New Zealanders' and migrants' travel behaviour.** Some factors influencing travel plans geopolitical risks deterring some overseas travellers, and the attractive Australian markets pulling some NZ workers.

**Key topic – The labour market remains tight in the March 2022 quarter, with signs of slowing employment growth.****Omicron had minimal effects to most industries, and the overall labour market remained tight in the March 2022 quarter.**

- The recent labour market statistics release showed the unemployment rate remaining unchanged at 3.2 percent. With the labour market remaining tight, wage growth increased to its highest level since 2009. Refer to **BR 2122-4158 Labour Market Statistics Snapshot** for further data on the labour market.
- The economy continues to weather COVID-19 outbreaks well. More people were away from work for a full week due to sickness over the quarter, likely due to the Omicron outbreak. However, this only made up a total of 1.6 percent (44,200 people) of employed people.
- There was a smaller than expected impact on total weekly hours worked, with a slight decline of 0.2 percent. Industries are likely to have been unevenly impacted with Hospitality facing worker absenteeism due to self-isolation requirements.
- The number of people working from home reduced over the quarter to 880,300 people (down 103,900 people), likely reflecting more people returning to workplaces in the less restrictive settings during the March quarter. Compared to the Alert Level 3 setting in the December 2021 quarter, the red traffic light setting in the March 2022 quarter is less restrictive.

Economic headwinds may be upcoming, and signs are emerging of slowing employment growth.

- Geopolitical instability, supply-chain disruptions, weak international growth, increasing interest rates and lower house prices may all contribute to weaker growth in New Zealand. This could lead to slowing employment growth and increased unemployment and underutilisation in the medium term.
- NZIER's Quarterly Survey of Business Opinion (QSBO) showed a net 33 per cent of businesses expecting weakening economic conditions. Although up slightly from the December 2021 quarter, business expectations are still at historically low levels. Pessimism was particularly pronounced in the retail sector, where 60 per cent of businesses expect deteriorating conditions.
- Consumer Confidence, as measured by ANZ-Roy Morgan, lifted slightly in April from the record low in March 2022. People remain pessimistic, likely reflecting Omicron disruptions, increases prices from high inflation, rising interest rates, and falling house prices
- We are beginning to see this declining confidence reflected in slower employment growth. The rate at which employment is growing remains lower than seen in the March 2021 quarter. Employment growth is likely to remain below 2021 levels throughout the year.



- However, firms are still looking to hire. The QSBO shows a net 23 per cent of businesses intend to increase staff numbers in the next quarter. As these intentions have been relatively stable over the past year, we may continue to see employment growth in the short-term at least.

The Government has supported workers and businesses most affected by COVID-19.

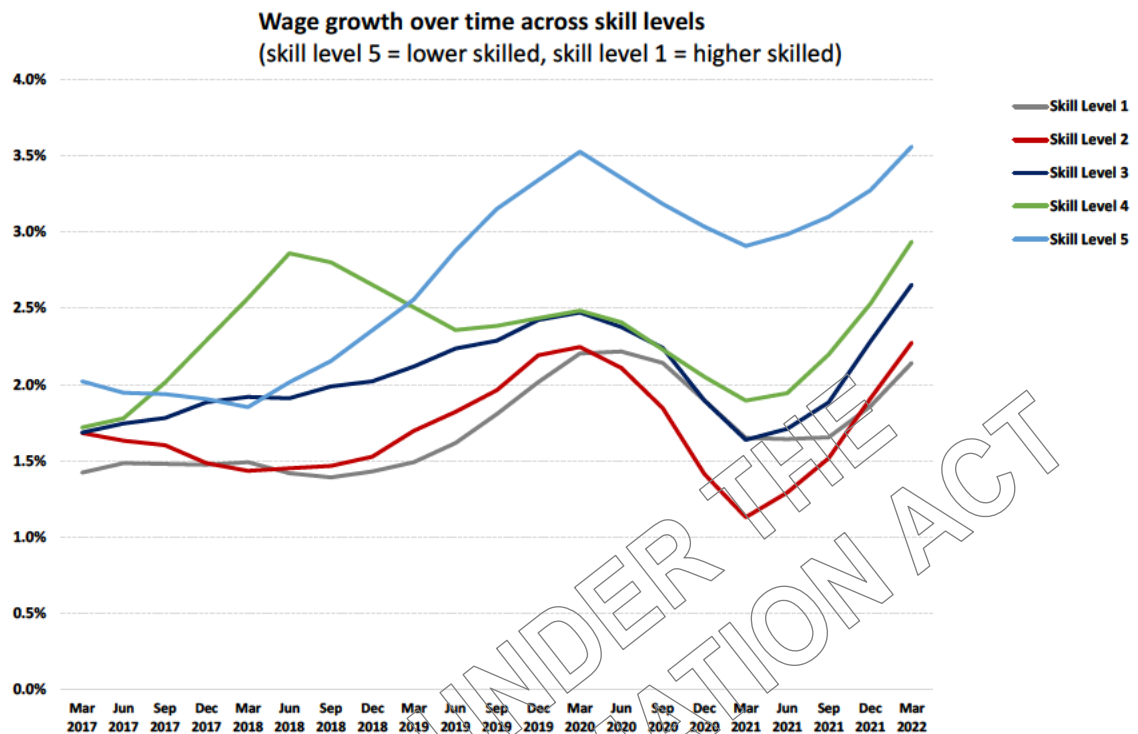
- The COVID-19 Leave Support Scheme is available to employers, including self-employed people, to help pay their employees who must self-isolate because of COVID-19 and can't work at home during that period.
- The COVID-19 Short-term Absence Payment helps businesses keep paying eligible workers who cannot work from home and need to miss work to stay at home while waiting on a COVID-19 test result.
- The targeted COVID-19 Support Payment (CSP) was available for businesses struggling with revenue during the Omicron outbreak. CSP helped viable businesses or organisations which experienced a 40% or more drop in revenue due to COVID-19 circumstances.
- Commentary on additional government policies from budget 2022 announced on 19 May 2022 will be provided in the June Employment Key Messages.

Key topic – Wages have risen, with labour market tightness being a key factor

Wage growth is at its highest rate since 2009, indicating that wages may be responding to the tight labour market.

- Wages are rising with more growth likely given the current labour market tightness, and strong employment. Annual wage growth as measured by the Labour Cost Index (LCI) was 3.0 percent over the year. The private sector increased 3.1 percent while the Public sector increased 2.7 percent over the year. Historically annual wage growth has been between 1.5 and 2 percent.
- More people are experiencing significant growth in their wages. For example, the proportion of employees receiving annual wage increases in the adjusted LCI rose to 64 per cent in the March 2022 quarter, up from 46 per cent in the March 2021 quarter.
- Although wages have risen across the board, low skilled workers have seen the sharpest increase shown in Figure 1. This is likely from increases in minimum wage, whereas high skilled workers have likely seen increases from firms trying to attract staff. The number of firms increasing wages has been rising along with the tight labour market.

Figure 1. Wage growth has been highest for low skilled¹ workers



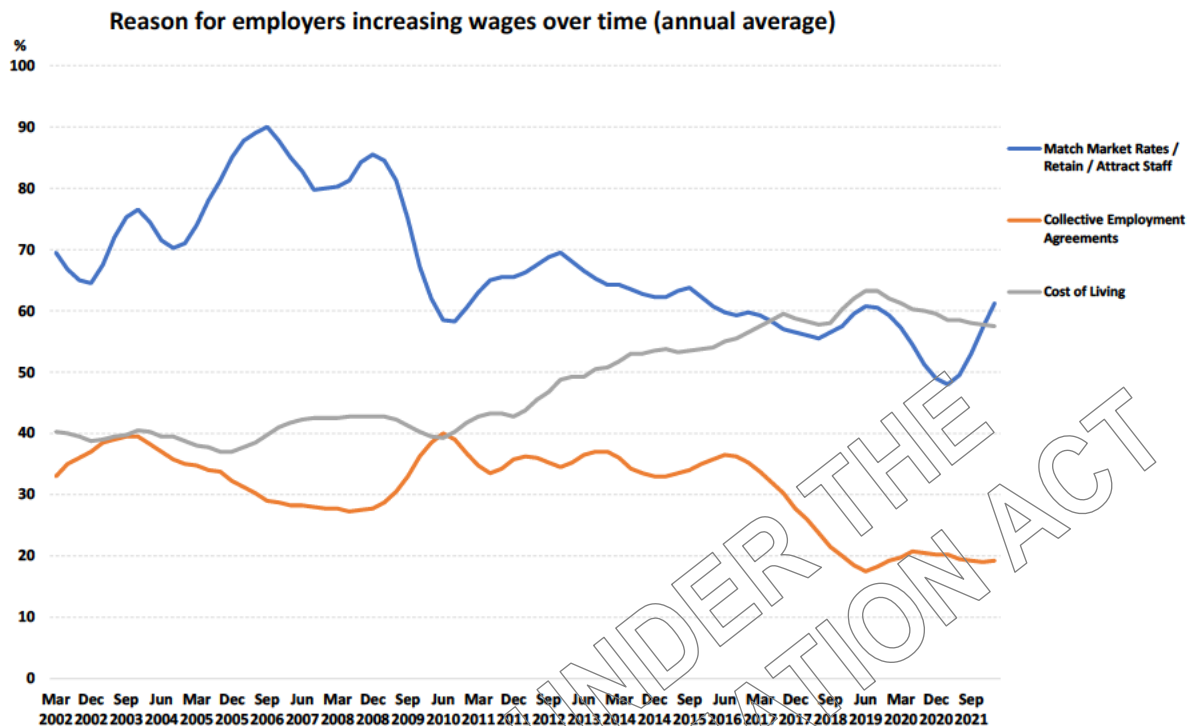
However, wages are not keeping up with the increasing cost of living, causing real wages to fall.

- The annual inflation rate for the year to March 2022 was 6.9 per cent, compared to annual wage growth of 3.0 per cent (in the LCI). Higher costs of living reduce the real wage increase for households. A reduction in real wages has a larger impact on low-income families where the price increase of necessary goods outpaces the increase in their income.
- Recent indicators point to ongoing and broad-based consumer price inflation in the medium-term. The March 2022 ANZ Business Outlook reported that 95.5 per cent of firms expect higher costs. Despite slightly reducing since March 2022, 76.7 per cent of firms intend to raise prices over the next quarter.
- NZIER consensus forecasts suggest wage growth will increase in the year ahead, consistent with increased labour demand, rising costs of living, and further increases in the minimum wage from 1 April. Figure 2 shows that the cost of living and match market rates/ retain/ attract staff are the main reasons firms have increased wages. MBIE is currently undertaking research to better understand the drivers of wage dynamics in New Zealand.

¹ Skill levels are broken into ANZSCO Skill 1-5. A detailed breakdown can be found at [1220.0 - ANZSCO - Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations, First Edition, Revision 1 \(abs.gov.au\)](https://abs.gov.au/1220.0-ANZSCO-Australian%20and%20New%20Zealand%20Standard%20Classification%20of%20Occupations,%20First%20Edition,%20Revision%201)



Figure 2. Firms are increasingly giving pay rises due to the labour market tightness



The Government is supporting people who face economic hardship.

- The Government increased minimum wage from \$18.90 an hour to \$20 an hour from 1 April 2021. Minimum wage was further raised to \$21.20 in April 2022 to better support those working minimum wage jobs.
- The Government plans to introduce legislation to allow bargaining for Fair Pay Agreements, to raise standards in low-paying sectors, and shift bargaining power in favour of workers.
- The Government has introduced the Care in Communities scheme following the shift into the COVID-19 Protection Framework. Since 5 December 2021, MSD has received a total of approximately 90,000 requests for welfare support through the Care in Communities scheme and made approximately 11,600 referrals to community-based providers.
- The Government has also provided a range of broader support to people self-isolating, including providing advice and assistance, other financial support, and making referrals to other external providers.
- As part of Budget 2021 weekly main benefit rates have been lifted providing an additional boost to families with children. This was implemented in two stages with an initial increase in July 2021, with the final increase on 1 April 2022. Additionally, student support rates (Student Allowances and Student Loan



Living Costs) have also been increased from 1 April 2022, to ensure that people are not disincentivised to study as a result of the main benefit changes.

- Main benefit abatement thresholds have been increased from 1 April 2021 to \$160 per week for all main benefits and to \$250 per week for the second threshold for recipients of Sole Parent Support, Supported Living Payment, and non-qualifying partners of recipients of New Zealand Superannuation/Veteran's Pension. This allows working beneficiaries to keep a greater portion of their earnings and will improve income adequacy and financial incentives to work part-time while on a benefit.

Key topic – Options for employers to address labour market tightness are available.

Firms can better utilise the existing work force to alleviate some labour shortages.

- Employers can address labour and skill shortages in several ways, including investing more in training and technology, making better use of part-time employees, making efforts to retain older workers, and partnering with MSD to access work-ready MSD clients.
- Underutilised workers are another source of labour, although people who fit in this category have different levels of potential engagement with the labour market. Some may be involved with other activities that generate social value (such as caring for children, or volunteer work).
- There are 95,000 people who work part time and are in the official underutilisation count. A wider view is around 250,000 people reporting they want more hours of work in the March 2022 HLFS. Of these, 129,400 people report there is not enough work available. This may be as they are already working the equivalent of one full time worker.
- People who are officially unemployed are available to start work and actively seeking work. Given the current strength of the labour market the number of people unemployed has reduced to 94,000 over the year (down 39,000 people). The current high demand for labour is a contributing factor to the current historic low unemployment rate of 3.2 percent.
- A wider official measure of spare capacity in the labour market is "the potential labour force" currently consisting of 91,000 people who considered just outside the labour force. With 69,900 people who are "available potential jobseekers"² and are available to start work but not actively seeking work. The remaining group is 22,000 of "unavailable jobseekers", who are people actively seeking work but not available to start. The number of available potential jobseekers has

² Note: The Jobseekers in the HLFS is a title for people in the potential labour force and differs from the Job-Seeker support benefit provided by MSD.



increased over the quarter (up 7,900 people). In the March quarter HLFS, people report own sickness/illness/injury/disability as the largest single reason for not actively seeking work although a job is wanted (44,000 people up 18.8 percent over the quarter).

The border reopening gives firms additional options for shortages in both lower and higher skilled workers.

- The Government has announced its five-stage path for reconnecting New Zealand to the rest of the world over the coming year. From July 2022, the changes to the immigration settings will mean fewer and higher skilled migrants will come into New Zealand, under the new Accredited Employer Work Visas requirements.
- Although some lower-wage migrant workers will no longer be eligible under the new immigration settings, firms can still hire people with Working Holiday Scheme Visas for low-paid jobs and some will be able to hire migrant workers for jobs paying less than the median wage under the sector agreements.
- At a given time, there could be around 20,000 people with Working Holiday Scheme Visas competing for lower skilled work. The key industries people with Working Holiday Scheme Visas typically enter are jobs in agriculture, forestry, and fishing (around 8,500 people); accommodation and food services industries (around 8,000 people); and administrative and support services (around 4,500 people).
- However, we do not know how many or quickly migrant workers will return to New Zealand. Geopolitical risks and the high cost of travel may deter some migrant workers over the next few years. There is also considerable uncertainty around how firms will adjust hiring behaviours between workers once the border restrictions have fully lifted.
- The border reopening is expected to ease some of the regional labour shortages in the long term. It is also likely to see New Zealanders heading offshore with migration flows possibly changing in the following ways:
 - More New Zealand citizens (including recent returnees) leaving to work in other countries.
 - Young New Zealanders leaving for their delayed Overseas Experience (OEs).
 - Temporary migrants who do not qualify for the 2021 Resident visa returning home.
 - Temporary migrants in other countries (students and workers) being able to enter New Zealand again.



Migration trends have typically mattered more at the local level meaning regional skill shortages may shift, reflecting the skills coming and going.

- New Zealand has been characterised by high rates of emigration and immigration, and New Zealand's rate of emigration is high by OECD standards. However, the number of New Zealand citizens emigrating (and the net migration loss of citizens) was falling well before the borders closed, with far fewer New Zealand residents emigrating to Australia since 2012.
- Travel behaviours remain highly uncertain, especially around how many New Zealand workers will resume their OE. Some New Zealanders in the 15-34 age group may prefer to defer their OE plans until the international scene becomes more settled, spreading the pent-up demand for OE over time.
- Inward migration may mean more competition in the labour market. People on benefits will likely be competing with more workers for some lower-skill jobs once migrant workers return.
- However, we do not know how many or quickly migrant workers will return to New Zealand. There is also considerable uncertainty around how firms will adjust hiring behaviours between workers once the border restrictions have fully lifted. MSD is currently undergoing work to better understand how the border re-opening may effect benefits.

MSD continues to support people into sustainable employment through a range of employment products and training programmes, including Flexi-wage and Mana in Mahi.

- Flexi wage is a subsidy to support job seekers who are disadvantaged in the labour market. There has been a total of 15,429 Flexi-wage placements since February 2021. Mana in Mahi helps people who need additional support to get paid jobs while gaining a formal industry qualification. There have been 4,839 placements since the program was introduced in 2018.
- Additionally, some employers can support upskilling MSD clients through training programs such as Apprenticeship Boost and Skills for industry. As of 31 March 2022, the Apprenticeship Boost has supported 43,185 apprentices throughout the lifetime of the program. Skills for Industry provides short term job focused training, with a total of 3,174 participants as of 31 March 2022.



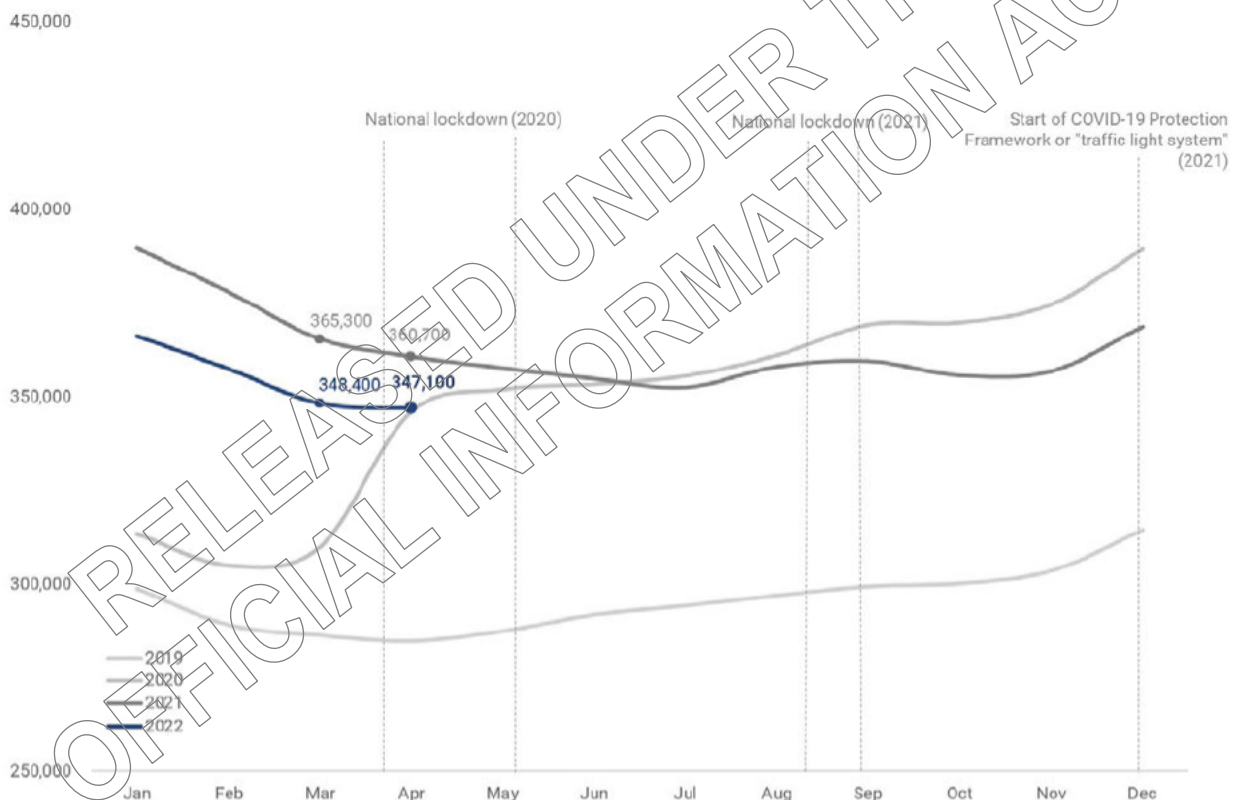
Standard topics

Benefits

Main benefit trends have continued to return to those seen prior to the pandemic.

- There were around 13,600 fewer people receiving a main benefit in April 2022 than in April 2021 (down 3.8 percent year-on-year, compared to 4.8 percent year-on-year decrease in March). Year-on-year reductions have been slowing down since the beginning of the year (see Figure 3 below). While this may reflect the ongoing uncertainty associated with the Omicron outbreak, it also suggests a return to usual trends seen prior to 2020.

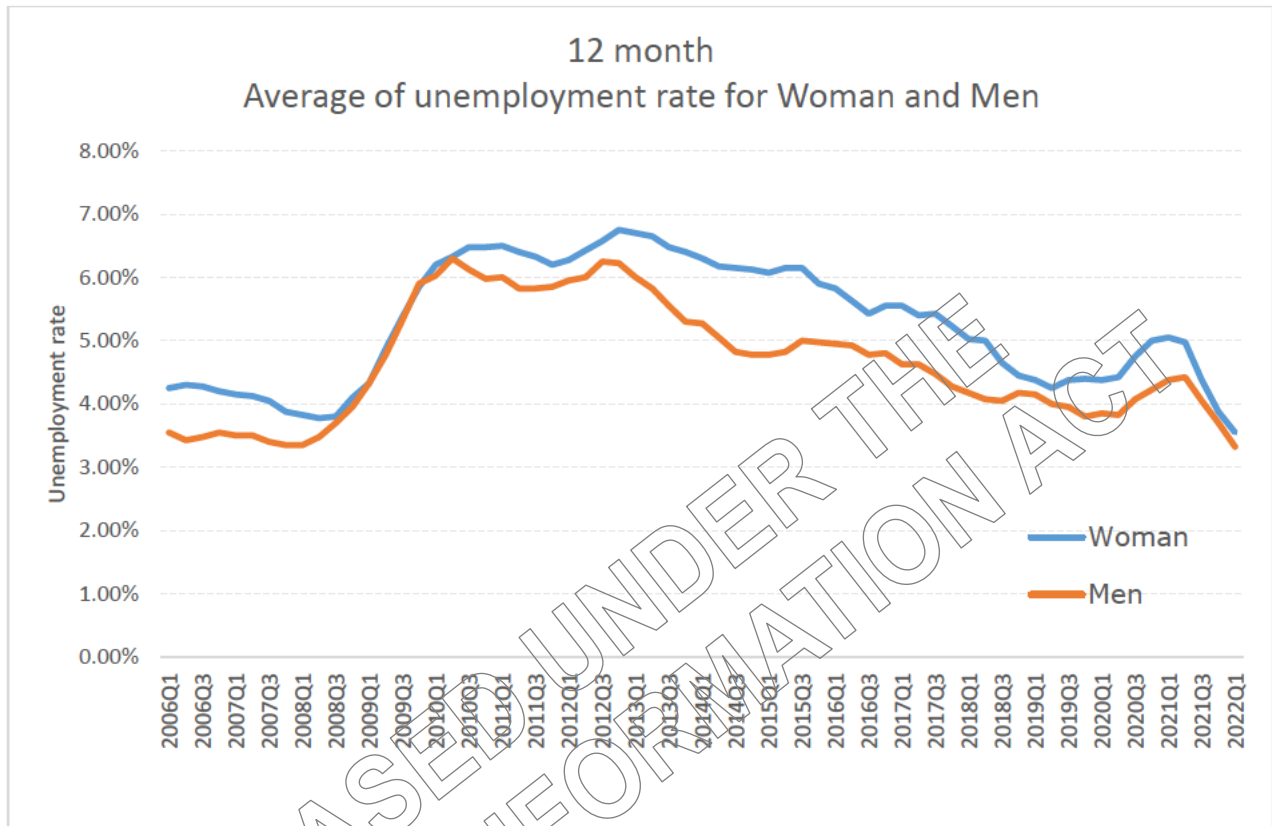
Figure 3. The decrease in the number of people receiving a main benefit in April was in line with pre-pandemic trends





Women
Labour market outcomes for women have continued to strengthen.

Figure 4. Labour market outcomes for women continue to strengthen



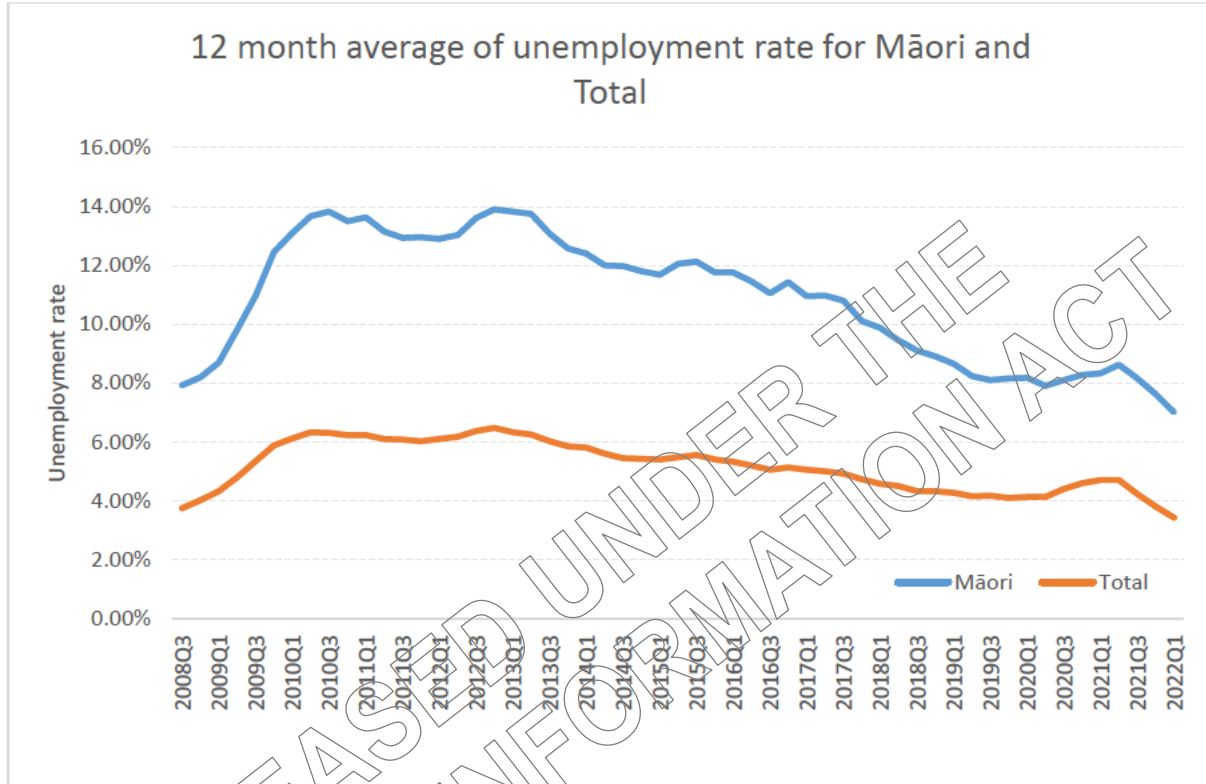
The Government is actively working to improve labour market outcomes for women.

- A commitment to advancing pay equity, including pay equity settlements in female-dominated workforces, and updating the Equal Pay Act to address the gender pay gap.
- Development of a targeted employment action plan for women under the Employment Strategy, to address issues faced by women in the labour market.
- Fair Pay Agreements, which are likely to help women in low-paid occupations and industries.



Māori
Labour market outcomes for Māori have recovered beyond pre-COVID-19 levels, indicating that long-term disparities are narrowing.

Figure 5. All outcomes for Māori have recovered beyond pre-COVID levels (not seasonally adjusted)



- The labour market outcomes have continued to improve for the Māori population. Refer to **BR 2122-4158 Annex Two – A3 Māori Labour Market Statistics Snapshot** for further data on the labour market.

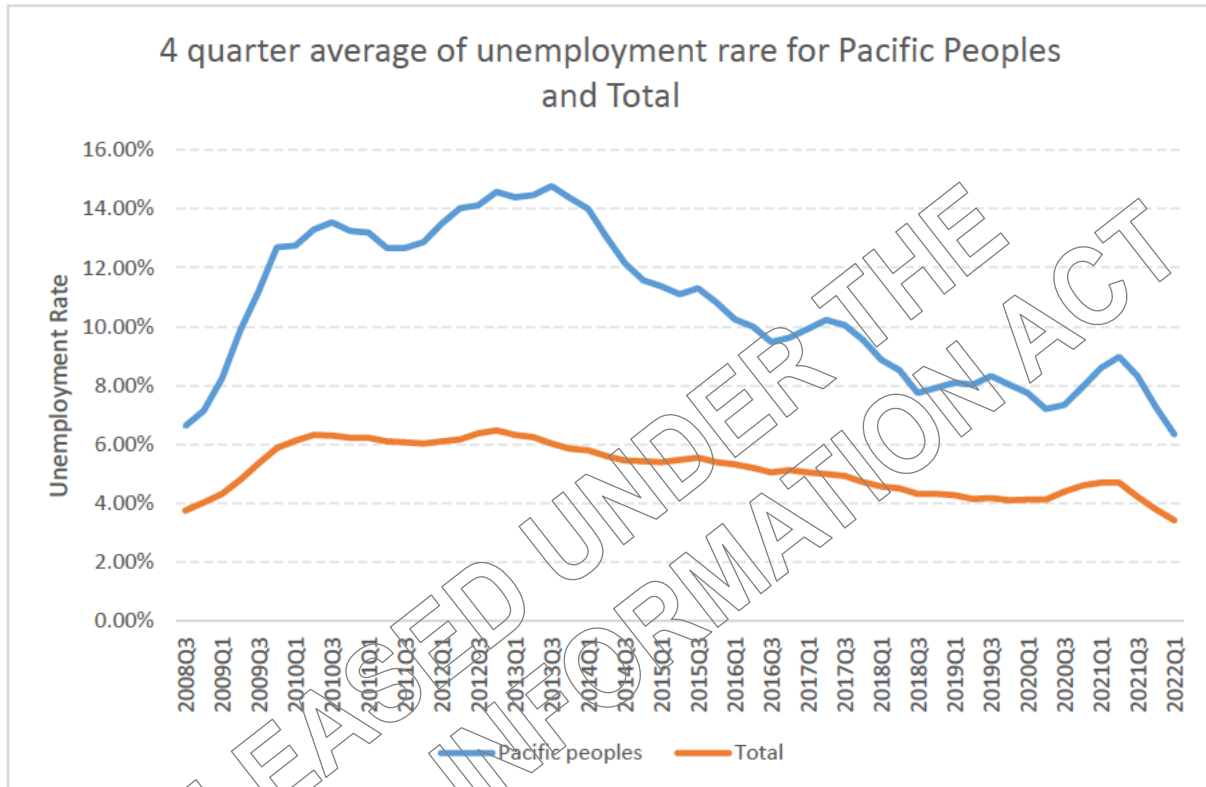
The Government is working to support Māori communities into better labour market outcomes.

- The launch of Te Mahere Whai Mahi Māori: the Māori Employment Action Plan to improve labour market outcomes for Māori.
- The Māori Trades and Training Fund established in 2020 to support community-led employment and training programmes through partnerships between Māori and the Crown.



**Pacific peoples
Labour market outcomes for Pacific peoples have recovered beyond pre-COVID-19 levels with some long-term disparities beginning to narrow.**

Figure 6. All outcomes for Pacific Peoples have recovered beyond pre-COVID levels (not seasonally adjusted)



- For Pacific Peoples, the labour market outcomes have also continued to improve. Refer to **BR 2122-4158 Annex Three – A3 Pacific Peoples Labour Market Statistics Snapshot** for further data on the labour market.

The Government is working to support Pacific communities into better labour market outcomes.

- The development of the Pacific Peoples Employment Action Plan to provide overarching strategies to lifting labour market outcomes.



Young people

Employment outcomes for youth have continued to strengthen, with reductions in NEET at near pre covid levels.

Table 1. Youth outcomes continue to strengthen across the board, but remain the most vulnerable to further economic shocks (not seasonally adjusted)

		Mar-22	Mar-21	Mar-20	Mar-17
Unemployment rate (qtr.)	15-19 years	15.8	18.8	18.9	20.6
	20-24 years	6.7	10.0	8.9	9.1
	Total (all ages)	3.4	4.9	4.5	5.2
Employment rate (qtr.)	15-19 years	45.0	38.9	40.5	39.3
	20-24 years	76.8	73.5	75.1	72.2
	Total (all ages)	68.8	67.2	67.8	67.5
Participation rate (qtr.)	15-19 years	53.5	47.9	49.9	49.5
	20-24 years	82.3	81.7	82.4	79.4
	Total (all ages)	71.2	70.7	71.0	71.2
NEET rate	15-19 years	11.9	12.5	14.3	11.4
	20-24 years	15.6	16.0	16.1	15.9
	Total (15-24)	13.8	14.3	15.2	13.7

The Government is working to improve labour market outcomes for young people.

- The Youth Employment Action Plan, to provide an overarching strategy to lift labour market outcomes for young people.
- Mana in Mahi provides a wage subsidy and additional supports (such as mentoring) to help people enter employment and gain an industry training qualification, including through apprenticeships.³

³ Mana in Mahi is not targeted to young people. However, young people make up a majority of participants.



Disabled people

Employment indicators for disabled people have improved since June 2020, although poorer labour market outcomes persist generally.

Table 2. Employment indicators have improved for disabled people (age 15-64) since June 2020 (not seasonally adjusted)

		Jun-21	Jun-20	Jun-19	Jun-17
Unemployment rate (qtr.)	Disabled	9.6%	8.3%	10.3%	12.9%
	Non-disabled	4.0%	4.0%	4.0%	4.7%
	Total	4.1%	4.1%	4.1%	4.9%
Employment rate (qtr.)	Disabled	42.5%	38.2%	40.2%	39.2%
	Non-disabled	78.9%	77.9%	78.6%	77.3%
	Total	77.6%	76.5%	77.3%	76.0%
Participation rate (qtr.)	Disabled	47.0%	41.6%	44.8%	45.1%
	Non-disabled	82.1%	81.2%	81.8%	81.2%
	Total	80.9%	79.8%	80.6%	79.9%
Underutilisation rate (qtr)	Disabled	21.8%	23.6%	21.2%	25.0%
	Non-disabled	10.3%	11.8%	10.8%	11.8%
	Total	10.5%	12.0%	11.0%	12.0%

- **We are working to improve labour market outcomes for disabled people.**

The main initiative to support this goal is the Disability Employment Action Plan (Working Matters), to provide an overarching strategy to lifting labour market outcomes.

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Appendix One: Key statistics

Table 3 Labour Force Statistics (seasonally adjusted)

	Mar-22	Dec-21	Mar-21	Mar-20
	(Current qtr)	(Prev qtr)	(1 year ago)	(2 years ago)
Employment Rate (per cent)	68.6	68.8	67.1	67.7
- Male (per cent)	73.2	73.3	72.1	72.8
- Female (per cent)	64.2	64.4	62.3	62.8
Employment (people)	2,826,000	2,824,000	2,748,000	2,744,000
Unemployment Rate (per cent)	3.2	3.2	4.6	4.2
- Male (per cent)	3.1	3.1	4.6	4.0
- Female (per cent)	3.3	3.3	4.6	4.4
Unemployment (people)	94,000	93,000	133,000	120,000
Underutilisation Rate (per cent)	9.3	9.2	12.1	10.4
- Male (per cent)	7.7	7.4	9.9	8.3
- Female (per cent)	11.1	11.2	14.5	12.7
Underutilisation (people)	280,000	276,000	361,000	307,000
Underemployment (people)	95,000	102,000	122,000	92,000
Potential Labour Force (people)	91,000	82,000	106,000	95,000
Participation Rate (per cent)	70.9	71.1	70.4	70.7
- Male (per cent)	75.6	75.6	75.6	75.8
- Female (per cent)	66.4	66.6	65.4	65.7
Not in the Labour Force (people)	1,197,000	1,188,000	1,212,000	1,187,000
NEET Rate (per cent) ⁴	13.8	11.3	14.3	15.2
NEET (people) ⁵	88,400	72,700	92,700	99,800
Average weekly earnings for FTEs (\$)	1406.12	1391.60	1329.84	1281.09
Average weekly paid hours for FTEs (hours)	38.86	38.92	38.48	38.48

⁴ NEET rates are not seasonally adjusted

⁵ Number of people in NEET is not seasonally adjusted

Table 4 Regional Statistics (not seasonally adjusted)

Region ⁶	Employment rate (%)	Per centage point change	Unemployment rate (%)	Per centage point change	Underutilisation rate (%)	Per centage point change	NEET rate (%)	Per centage point change
Northland	61.3	-2.4	3.5	-1.9	11.3	-1.7	10.8	-8.9
Auckland	69.3	2.2	3.6	-1.7	9.5	-2.9	15.3	-1.5
Waikato	67.2	0.2	3.9	-1.5	9.1	-2.9	14.8	-3.4
Bay of Plenty	65.5	0.9	4.2	-1.3	12.1	0.2	18.7	8.1
Gisborne/Hawke's Bay	64.1	-0.7	3.5	-1.6	9.2	-4.3	16.1	1.6
Taranaki	65.2	-1.2	2.4	-2.9	9.1	-4.8	11.8	-2.1
Manawatū / Whanganui	69.2	2.4	2.8	-1	8.1	-4.7	10.9	-1.8
Wellington	73.6	3.3	2.9	-1.7	9.0	-3.1	11.1	-0.3
Nelson / Tasman / Marlborough / West Coast	68.2	-1.5	3.2	0.0	9.5	-1.8	11.9	2.6
Canterbury	70.7	2.3	3.3	-1.2	9.3	-2.9	12.7	1.1
Otago	67.1	1.9	3.5	-1.0	10.0	-2.5	12.1	2.4
Southland	72.7	3.6	2.6	-0.9	8.6	-4.9	8.4	3.8

⁶ Regional council-level rates are not seasonally adjusted and are more variable than national rates.

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