Loneliness has become a bit of a public issue here recently, driven by the creation in the United Kingdom of the position of a Minister for Loneliness. What has been interesting has been the assumption that in New Zealand that issue is the responsibility of the Minister for Seniors. I’ve been getting questions about what the Government or me as Minister, think about this.

What those journalists are assuming, of course, is that loneliness is primarily a problem for senior New Zealanders. It isn’t – I haven’t seen the figures for younger people, but ageing and retirement don’t necessarily lead to greater loneliness. Loneliness actually decreases as people get older (11.3% of people aged 48-59 felt lonely, compared to 6.6% aged 79-90).

But loneliness (a lack of quality and closeness in relationships) and isolation (where people simply don’t have relationships) are still major issues for older people and they are things we increasingly need to think about – and do something about – as a country as our population ages.

At a personal level, I think it’s incredibly sad to lose touch with family and friends, and the fact that between 6 and 10 percent of older people say they are ‘very lonely’ is horrible. We love our parents and grandparents; this shouldn’t happen.

Life, however, means that sometimes it does. There can be family issues that don’t get dealt with, people can move, people can get ill – and sometimes they may not have much support to start with.

The problem is complex. Some people feel lonely but are not isolated. Others are isolated and not lonely. And some people are both lonely and isolated. There are also variations in terms of ethnicity, and the figures show that more rural and city people feel lonely than people in provincial areas.

That means there is no simple answer to fixing the problem, which is about having relationships, good relationships, throughout our lives. But there are steps underway to make sure our senior citizens stay engaged with their community and live better lives.

This is one reason it is important to update the Positive Ageing Strategy and I’ll be talking about what we’re going to do with that later this week.

We need to build our understanding of peoples’ needs as they age, and what the barriers are for them to be part of the community.

The Government is also applying for affiliate membership to the World Health Organisation Age-friendly Communities programme, a major milestone that will support Age-friendly projects throughout New Zealand.

So, I encourage you to take the Office’s Age-friendly survey. Find out more later in this newsletter. Please look, and tell us more about your experience.
At 76 Kim Workman shows no signs of slowing down. The self-proclaimed social justice crusader was named the 2018 MetLife Care Senior New Zealander of the Year.

Kim was originally nominated by a friend. He says he didn’t think much of it until he got a call from the award organisers. “All the finalists attend a fancy dinner and just before the dinner I get a call from the organiser asking if I was wearing a dinner suit. When I responded no he said ‘I really think you should wear a dinner suit’. That’s when I thought I might have won”.

Kim has devoted over 50 years to public service and social justice advocacy but he started in a very different career. At 17 his father helped recruit him into the New Zealand Police Cadets. “I spent 16 years in that job, until one day I took a psychometric test and found that I should never have been in the police”.

He later spent time in the Office for the Ombudsman, the State Services Commission, and Ministry for Maori Affairs before becoming the Head of the Prison Service. Workman found his true passion later in life when he began his social justice work. “When you look back at someone’s life, it’s like they’ve been serving an apprenticeship until they’re about 60” says Workman. “It’s not until later in life that you figure out who you really are and what you’re meant to be doing”.

His drive to keep learning has extended well past his working career- in recent years he has perfected his jazz piano skills. He will release his memoir later this year.

Late last year the Government announced a new Winter Energy Payment to help people receiving NZ Super, Veteran’s Pension and government assistance with the cost of heating their home over winter. Couples and people with dependent children will get $31.82 a week, and single people will get $20.46.

The payment will begin on 1 July this year and will be paid with your usual NZ Super or Veteran’s Pension until 30 September.

We’ve had a few questions since the announcement, and thought you might find the following useful:

**Do I need to apply for the Winter Energy Payment?**

No. You’ll get the payment automatically. It will be paid with your NZ Super or Veteran’s Pension. You don’t need to apply.

**Will I be paid at the couple or single rate?**

Couples will be paid at the couple rate, whether you live in the same house or not. Single people will be paid at the single rate, even if you share a house with others who are eligible for the Winter Energy Payment.

**Why is the Winter Energy Payment higher for couples?**

The Winter Energy Payment has been calculated to reflect the higher heating costs for households of more than one person.

**Water heating costs, for example, are higher for these households.**

**My partner and I both get NZ Super. Will we each receive a payment?**

If you’re both eligible for the couple’s payment, the full amount will paid into one of your accounts.

**Is the Winter Energy Payment taxable income?**

No, you don’t pay tax on the Winter Energy Payment. To find out more go to www.workandincome.govt.nz
Having problems with your utilities provider?

It’s coming to that time of year again - time to dig out your winter woollies and dust off the heater.

Winter can be a stressful time for people struggling with power bills. Many people are unsure how accurate their bill is and whether they are on the best plan.

Utilities Disputes may be able to help. They are a free and independent service that can answer your questions or respond to your complaints about your electricity, gas or water providers. They can also help with disputes surrounding access to shared property for broadband installations.

“During winter we receive a lot of calls about high bills. People need to stay warm and turning up the heat can be costly,” says Commissioner Nanette Moreau.

“We encourage people to make sure they are on the right plan.”

Utilities Disputes can help with most energy provider issues including: metering, customer service, disconnections, surges, and everything in between.

Questions you can ask your energy company

Am I a low user or a standard user?
Being on a low user plan is only cheaper if you are a low user

Is there a weekly payment plan?
Some companies offer a weekly payment plan to build credit during summer and off-set high bills during winter

Is my bill an estimate or an actual reading?
A low estimated bill one month can mean a higher bill the following month. Some companies will accept a customer reading to ensure bills are accurate.

Stay strong to avoid falls

Every year one in three people aged 65 and older will have a fall. For those aged 80 and over, the risk increases to one in two people.

But a new movement has been launched to help people over 65 stay healthy, active and independent.

‘Live Stronger for Longer’ is an initiative by government agencies and health providers across New Zealand aimed specifically at people over 65.

The aim is to provide people practical advice – whether they’re still working, recently retired, or happily enjoying retirement.

Falls prevention is key and regular exercise is one of the best things you can do to help reduce the risk of falls.

And you don’t have to do it alone. The ‘Live Stronger for Longer’ website has links to local groups who run strength and balance classes. All the classes are designed to support Seniors to build their leg and core strength and improve their balance.

There’s something for everyone, from Pilates, tai chi, chair yoga and light circuit classes.

Find out if there’s a class in your area and look for the approved quality tick logo. This ensures that the class has been approved as safe and effective for older people.

For more information, go to www.livestronger.org.nz

Plan ahead

Falls can happen at any time. So it’s important to plan ahead.

Here are a few simple things you can do to prepare for a possible fall:

• Have your telephone within easy reach
• Leave a spare key in a secure place or with someone you trust who can let themselves in if needed
• Get a personal medical alarm
• Discuss your plan with friends and family.
Fridays are a special day at Auckland’s Selwyn Village. The air fills with the sound of little ones laughing (and sometimes crying) as babies and toddlers pay residents a visit.

The ‘Baby Buddies’ programme was launched in 2015 and brings together local Plunket mothers and their young ones with the village’s residents.

Each week Seniors read books to the children, help them with arts, crafts and pre-school learning activities, share stories or join in on singing and dancing performances.

The Foundation’s Registered Diversional Therapist, Orquidea Mortera, oversees the programme and says the benefits are reciprocal.

“By opening their home to the mothers and babies – and sharing their knowledge, wisdom and experience – residents have meaningful engagement with members of the local community.

“For new mums who may have no close family nearby, the visits offer the chance to meet others and also provide valuable socialisation opportunities for their little ones.

“There’s something so special about how the little ones and the residents connect. Some of our residents don’t have grandchildren of their own, so these visits can be very uplifting”.

Carolyn Berridge is a Baby Buddies team leader. The Point Chevalier mum, attends the weekly sessions with her toddler, Sam.

NZ Super and Veteran’s Pension payments are adjusted each year to reflect increases in the cost of living and the average wage.

From 1 April 2018, weekly rates will increase by:

- $9.96 gross or $8.21 after ‘M’ tax for a married couple (each)
- $12.94 gross or $10.67 after ‘M’ tax for a single person living alone
- $11.95 gross or $9.85 after ‘M’ tax for a single person sharing accommodation.

The first full payment at the new rate will be on 17 April. For a full summary of the new rates go to www.workandincome.govt.nz and search for benefit rates 2018.
Planning for the future is a no-brainer

No one plans to get sick but making sure all your important documents are organised will make a big difference to your family left behind.

It’s a good idea to let your family know where to find your important documents, just in case something unexpected happens. Find a safe spot at home. A good idea is to make copies and save them online or with your lawyer.

Important documents include:

- A copy of your will
- Birth certificate
- Details of your insurance policies
- A list, including contact details, of organisations and people to notify if anything happens
- Instructions on where all your property and investments are and who to contact about them
- Important documents such as land titles and mortgage agreements.

Importantly, your executor and family should know where they can find them.

Retirement Commissioner

Our telephones connect us to the outside world, bringing news, help and comfort. But they can also allow some of the world’s most deceptive people to enter our lives, and our bank accounts.

Our Fraud Education Manager at the Commission for Financial Capability has been talking to a woman who took a call from a man claiming to be with her telephone provider’s company. He gained access to her computer, then, through tactics of confusion and fear, talked her into withdrawing $8000.

The scammer tricked her into keeping her landline and mobile phone locked into her call with him, even convincing her to stay on the phone while she transferred money from a bank branch so the teller could not question her.

When she realised she had been scammed, she called us in tears. We are trying to help her, but she may never see that money again.

Her story is one of many that come to us and other agencies as telephone scams increase in number and duplicity. Seniors are particularly at risk as many still have a landline that they rely on.

The next time the phone rings remember these five tips:

1. Take a breath, stop and think about whether the caller sounds suspicious. Don’t be hurried into any kind of action.
2. If the caller says they are from your telephone or internet company, ask them what your account number is. Chances are they won’t know and will hang up.
3. If you are suspicious, say you can’t talk now and will call them back. Then ring the company using the number on your statement or its website to check if the call was genuine.
4. Don’t give anyone remote access to your computer unless you have called them.
5. Remember, no professional company uses fear or bullying tactics. If you start to feel anxious or coerced, hang up.
Protect against shingles now

From 1 April, immunisation against shingles will be free for people turning 65 as part of changes to the National Immunisation Schedule.

Free shingle immunisation will then continue for the next two years, for anyone aged 66 to 80.

It’s particularly important because shingles most commonly affects older people or people with a weakened immune system.

As you get older, the protection from earlier immunisations can begin to wear off so it’s important to keep up to date with all your immunisations.

Make sure you’re also protected against influenza, tetanus and diphtheria. All three vaccines can be given on the one day.

Anyone 65 years and over can get the free annual influenza or ‘flu’ shot. It’s best to get your flu shot in April or May, so you’re protected before winter and the main flu season hits. Contact your general practitioner to receive your free booster immunisations and flu shot.

For more information, go to www.health.govt.nz/immunisation

Shingles symptoms
Shingles is a common medical condition and it’s often very painful. As many as one in three people will get shingles in their lifetime. And for people aged 85 years and over, at least half will have had shingles.

Shingle symptoms may include:
• Pain or altered sensation, such as burning, itching or tingling, for a few days before the rash, followed by acute throbbing or burning pain
• Fatigue, fever, headache
• Localised rash on one side of the body, only in the area the infected nerve is associated with
• Fluid-filled blisters.

Tell us how Age-friendly your community is

The concept of Age-friendly communities was originally developed by the World Health Organisation.

It describes a community that respects the rights of older people, celebrates Seniors, addresses inequality, and encourages older people to be part of community activities and decision-making.

So… is New Zealand Age-friendly? We want to understand your experience.

How safe is it where you live? Do you have access to the services you need? Is it easy to get around? Do you will be able to stay in your own home as you get older?

The survey should take less than five minutes to complete. It is confidential, and your responses are completely anonymous.

Take the survey at: www.surveymonkey.com/r/Age-friendlyNZ

The survey closes at 5pm on Monday 9 April.

TRAVELLING OVERSEAS?

If you’ll be away for more than 4 weeks let us know

Most of the time your NZ Super or Veteran’s Pension won’t be affected if you’re away for less than 26 weeks. Other payments may be affected.

Call 0800 552 002 or tell us online at www.workandincome.govt.nz and search for travelling

If you’re travelling for longer or don’t know when you’ll be back, contact us.
Check out the latest special offers for our super seniors through the SuperSeniors website.

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