

bureaucracy with heart

A close friend of mine, a woman of courage and persistence, was in a pretty pickle a while back.

Although she lives down country she gratefully accepted my offer to take up her case with Work and Income. After her file was transferred to the local office I arranged a meeting with the manager, Paul Backler.

I confess I did not have high expectations of receiving a decent hearing. So I was astonished when one of the first things Paul told me was that he had been awake at 4 am that morning, worrying about my friend and her situation, wondering how Work and Income could improve their support for her.

This was bureaucracy at its best, bureaucracy with a heart, the kindness our prime minister wants our Government to show to the people it serves. I came to know Paul Backler better over some months as he and his staff patiently worked through a mountain of detail in what he later admitted was the most complex case he had encountered in over three decades of service.

Straight out of school in 1986 Paul tells me he had a choice of being a car salesman, working in a bank or in the then Social Welfare. His mother said Social Welfare was the best, as it would give him an opportunity to have a positive impact on his community, so we have her to thank for his chosen career.

Paul's experience of the hierarchy of bullies and having been bullied at school gave him an empathy for those in need of support. In his childhood he also learnt how hard it was for a solo mum to get by and overcome the effects of domestic violence.

Thirty-three years ago government agencies were very different. Paul recalls microfiche and typing pods, cigarette smoke, desks covered with files, forms that took a week to be processed. He remembers it as "very relaxed, a bit like the TV programme Gliding On."

About the turn of the century, came the amalgamation with the employment service and Paul became a work broker. He loved this role, connecting people, building relationships, seeing them grow in both



self-esteem and income. He'd chase the ratbags who didn't turn up, getting them out of bed and off to work.

Building positive relationships is key in the many roles Paul has held: case manager, checking officer, staff trainer, assistant manager. Finally, in 2011, he came to the Whakatane office as manager.

In March 2018 Minister for Social Development Carmel Sepuloni said she had spoken with the ministry about the need for a culture change at Work and Income to reflect the principles of "acting with decency, fairness and compassion ... values that will underpin our thinking as we look to building a fairer welfare system".

According to Paul, the local office has been on "one heck of a journey" over the past two years. Closer relationships have been built with the hospital, iwi services, Salvation Army, and other government agencies. The emphasis is no longer just on getting people off benefits and into work but promoting other ways for people to be productive in the community through voluntary work, part time work, people engaging with mental health services.

About two years ago I searched in vain for a list of service-user rights. On their website now, in no fewer than 12 languages, is a clear statement of Work and Income's commitment to their clients.

When I mentioned recently that I considered Work and Income a mostly positive influence on our community my remark was met with astonishment by one listener. Her unremitting negative attitude came from years of prior experience. Even today they won't only have cheerleaders. After all, even government services focused on kindness and compassion can't say "yes" all the time.

A fortnightly series for seniors by Ruth Gerzon from Eastern Bay Villages.

Ruth can be contacted by phoning 027 4308149 or email easternbayvillages@gmail.com.



grey matters by Ruth Gerzon

There will always be those who feel hard done by when a request is denied.

Change will take time. Yet already, Paul is pleased to recount, there are months in which the local office receives twice as many compliments as complaints. That is a good news story.

One commitment Work and Income now makes is to "let you know everything you may be eli-

gible for". An excellent website process (<https://check.msd.govt.nz>) even steps you through a list of questions so you can quickly find out for yourself.

Alternatively, readers are welcome to hear Paul Backler speak at an Eastern Bay Villages public meeting. Knox Presbyterian Church, Domain Road, Whakatane Tuesday 12 November, 10am to 11.30am. All welcome.

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Equestrian What's On!

Your monthly guide to equestrian events in the Eastern Bay of Plenty.

Friday 8th November

Twilight Derby Opotiki 5pm, \$5 levy - to open the agriculture day
Twilight Show Jumping Night Memorial Park, Opotiki to open the district agricultural day. **Contact: Erin Clarke 027 572 0743**

Saturday 9th November

Showhunter Derby 9am start incorporated with Ag day. Opotiki Domain. **Contact Karlene 027 311 8547**

Friday 15th - Sunday 17th November

Eastern BOP Hunt Trek 2019 at Pikowai. Cost: \$300. Three days of trekking over stunning farmland with coastal views. All funds raised go to our local hunt club. **Contact: Gaynor 021 023 45108.** ebophunttrek@gmail.com

Saturday 16th November

Rotorua Pony Club - open dressage/BOP Championships 10am, Rerewhakaaitu Domain, Rotorua
Nigel Heron nigel.heron@tll.co.nz **0274664156**
Dress Code: Pony Club members - full pony club uniform. Non pony club members may wear jackets
Ribbons 1st - 4th place. There will be a sausage sizzle available.

Sunday 17th November

ORUANUI PONY CLUB - Taupo Dressage ONE DAY EVENT
Oruanui PC ODE is on Sunday 17th November with classes from 50cm First Start to 90cm, and with adult and 17 and under sections. Entries are via Equestrian entries. There will be a coffee & ice cream cart and BBQ on the day. **Event Secretary - Jenny Nelson** trafalgarhills@hotmail.com
Phone - 021 031 7878

Sunday 24th November

Riding for the Disabled Fundraiser Trek - Chatten Farm, Manawahe
660 Hectares of beautiful farmland and Native Bush for this fabulous trek. There are two ride times, beginner riders to start at 9am and Confident Riders at 10am. The cost is \$40 per rider/horse. All riders are welcome, children to be accompanied by a supervising adult. Sausage sizzle and Drinks available to purchase. **Call Meesh on 021 022 01411**

Sunday 8th December

Kawerau Pony Club Gymkhana 9.30am start. Tamarangi Drive, Kawerau
Novice and Intermediate (age limit 21). **Contact Ali Cogle 027 456 3626** kawerauponyclub@gmail.com

To add an event, please email egoldsmith@pggwrightson.co.nz

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CARING EAR:
Work and Income Whakatane's Paul Backler will speak at a public meeting next week. Photo supplied