COVID-19 is presenting both challenges and opportunities. Over the last couple of months, DWC has hosted journalists and reporters from RNZ Breakfast, Stuff, NZ Herald and Seven Sharp, just to name a few. This has resulted in great exposure for the region in the national media. We thank all our tourism operators who have helped showcase the Coast to the rest of the country.

In the current environment the West Coast has been doing relatively well at attracting domestic visitors. According to MBIE data, retail spending on the Coast over the past four weeks was 7.9% higher than for the same period last year. In contrast New Zealand has experienced a decrease in spending of 8%.

Despite the current positive numbers, we remain cautious as there is no guarantee on how long domestic visitor numbers will continue and when international visitors will return. COVID-19 is already having a significant effect on our economy. Unemployment amongst our working-age population has now risen to 7.9% - up from 6.1% at the start of the year. It’s important to note that these figures are for the week ended 26 August. Since then the wage subsidy extension and the resurgence wage subsidy have begun to end, so we would expect the jobseeker numbers to have increased further.

The impact of COVID is being experienced in vastly different ways across the region, with the Glacier Country being particularly hard hit by the loss of international visitors. It is understandably having a very real effect on the mental wellbeing of business owners and their staff. With this in mind, we recently held a wellbeing workshop in Fox Glacier.

The full extent of the economic shock of COVID is still to play out, so it is vital we support one another and leverage available opportunities.

DWC’s Capability and Growth Advisors have now issued around 200 vouchers to local businesses through the Regional Business Partner (RBP) network’s COVID-19 Business Advisory Fund and the Tourism Transition Fund. This support has enabled local businesses to tap into valuable professional advice services. We have also signed up more local service providers to the RBP programme to ensure we can keep both the advice and revenue on the Coast.

Our new PG-funded Upskill employment and training scheme has hit the ground running. The Upskill team are providing further opportunities for West Coast businesses, supporting people to attain recognised industry qualifications, and building industry skills. The timing of Upskill might not be better with numerous construction projects about to get underway. We are supporting local companies to get ready to take on contracts, meaning less of the work will end up with outside contractors.

At DWC, we are looking at wider opportunities for the region. Alongside the West Coast Regional Council, Department of Conservation and Iwi, we have just signed an MOU to form the Kotahitanga kit e Uru Regional Alliance. The Alliance has been established to initiate, support and drive West Coast initiatives and secure central government funding to support the economic recovery and mitigate the social and economic impacts of COVID.

There are also opportunities to mitigate the economic impact of COVID by increasing our output in the minerals sector. The proposed reopening of the Spring Creek mine would have a significant positive economic impact. The mine has some of the highest quality coal in the world, which can be used in the manufacture of silicon for electronics and solar panels. A real win-win opportunity.