



## ***New Zealand Government's COVID-19 responses to support the wellbeing of children, young people and their families***

Written statement for UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti webinar on “What the Experts Say – Coronavirus and Children: Support for families”, 4 June 2020

### **Introduction**

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Because of its relative physical isolation in the South Pacific, the New Zealand Government had more time than other countries to prepare for and respond early to the COVID-19 pandemic. It did so by moving quickly to close its borders, and by instituting a full “Level 4” lockdown from March 26, meaning all non-essential businesses closed and most New Zealanders were required to self-isolate at home for several weeks<sup>1</sup>. At the time there were 205 confirmed or probable cases of COVID-19. And on 17 and 23 March the Government announced initial measures to help support low income New Zealanders, jobs and businesses from the global impact of the pandemic<sup>2</sup>. Further measures with a specific focus on child and youth wellbeing have followed.

### **Background: Reducing child poverty and improving child and youth wellbeing in New Zealand**

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Since its launch in August 2019, New Zealand’s first Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy [Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy](#) has become firmly embedded into the core work of government agencies. Underpinned by the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018 and amendments to The Children’s Act 2014, the Strategy sets out a shared understanding of what young New Zealanders said is important for good wellbeing, what government is doing and how others can help.

The Strategy provides the overarching framework for our cross-agency response efforts for children and young people. Its vision, principles, six wellbeing outcomes, and indicators for measuring progress are as relevant now as ever. It already has a strong focus on reducing child poverty and mitigating the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage, improving the wellbeing of all children and young people with greater needs, and reducing inequity of outcomes. That focus hasn’t changed.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/new-zealand-moves-covid-19-alert-level-3-then-level-4-48-hours>

<sup>2</sup> <https://treasury.govt.nz/news-and-events/news/covid-19-economic-package-updated>



Accompanying the Strategy is a [Programme of Action](#), which sets out the Government's policies and actions, including significant new investments from its first 'Wellbeing Budget' in 2019, to help achieve the vision and outcomes. These actions will continue to evolve as agencies review, re-scale and in some cases re-pivot, activities in response to emerging issues and needs, as well as new opportunities to make transformative and lasting change. Through the Strategy we've established strong mechanisms for cross-agency work and longer-term planning and reporting. We're also continuing our work to help engage other sectors and mobilise collective action.

An annual Child Poverty Budget report, released alongside the May 2020 Budget, provides a summary of the initiatives taken by the Government to reduce child poverty and mitigate the impacts of socioeconomic disadvantage. The [2020 Child Poverty Budget report](#) shows that the Government was on track to meet its 3-year targets prior to COVID-19, but the post-COVID-19 situation is less clear, due to the yet unknown economic impacts.

## **COVID-19's impacts on child and youth wellbeing**

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Evidence on the impact of previous pandemics and recessions, as well our recent experience of the Christchurch earthquakes, together with emerging information and insights on the experiences of children, young people and their families over the past few weeks have indicated that:

- All children and young people have had their lives disrupted and have likely experienced some anxiety, stress and day-to-day challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The impact on children is particularly important because of the potential effects over the course of their lifetime
- As unemployment and economic disruption increases, more severe psycho-social and financial impacts are likely to be felt, particularly by those children and young people who are already disadvantaged, and risk compounding existing inequities. This group is also likely to grow as more young people and families face significant economic hardship for the first time.
- At the same time as working quickly to address the immediate issues, we must also prepare for longer-term recovery. It will take time before we see the full extent of the impacts of COVID-19 for children and young people.
- Building protective factors through positive action and empowering young people, their families and communities can help to mitigate these negative effects.
- Sustainable, joined-up local support for children and young people and their families will be critical. Effective recovery requires collaborative partnerships, effective leadership, careful planning, and engaged, informed and resilient communities.

## Government's response

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There's been considerable activity across central and local government and by community leaders, including youth organisations, to mitigate the immediate social impacts associated with the lockdown period, and to ensure children, young people and their families have what they need. New government investments have been accompanied by strong focus on outreach support to vulnerable groups of children, young people and their families, using trusted community networks supported by local and central government.

Major recent investments and initiatives to support child wellbeing and poverty reduction, including Budget 2020 initiatives, and those included in a dedicated COVID Relief and Recovery Fund are set out below.

The Government introduced a number of initial income support measures from 1 April, including [increasing benefits](#) to respond to the economic impacts of COVID-19, and the [Employer Wage Subsidy Scheme](#) to support businesses to retain workers and support employment.

Further initiatives included the provision of digital devices and support for [online education](#), and parenting and [mental health resources](#) for parents, caregivers, children and young people to help them retain virtual contact with their support systems during the lockdown and cope with the new pressures many are experiencing. Additional targeted [support was later introduced for Māori learners and whānau to reconnect and succeed in education](#) and to revitalise the Māori language, as well as ensuring provision of [timely and flexible support for Māori families](#) and communities who need it the most.

Budget 2020 further dedicated \$50 billion to the COVID-19 Relief and Recovery Fund which is the basis for funding a range of initiatives that address challenges and pressures that families will face.

This includes a [Trades and Apprenticeships Training Package](#) which provides training, re-training and employment support, including specific programmes targeting young people, a targeted support fund that removes costs for many vocational education and training courses, and investment to create almost [11,000 new jobs in regional NZ to restore our environment](#).

A new Government Housing Build programme will provide [8,000 new public and transitional homes](#) over the next four to five years to those most at risk, while ensuring investment into the residential construction sector over the coming years. There are also additional [tailored housing outcomes for Māori](#) and for [Pacific families and communities](#).

The Government has funded a number of new initiatives to address an expected increase in food insecurity, including significant expansion of the [Free and Healthy School Lunch Programme](#); [support for food rescue, foodbanks and community food providers](#); and [redistribution of surplus food](#) from growers and producers.

Budget 2020 also includes additional funding to help alleviate financial hardship caused by COVID-19 for caregivers of children who are unable to be looked after by their parents. This package includes [increasing the base rate of the Orphan's Benefit, Unsupported Child Benefit and Foster Care Allowance](#).

Additionally, Budget 2020 [strengthens specialist family violence and sexual violence services](#), building on significant investments in the 2019 Wellbeing Budget and Budget 2018. This investment will help address cost pressures experienced by specialist services, supporting victims to be safe and recover when family violence does occur, and delivering services that

help people to stop engaging in violence. It also provides therapeutic services and treatment for children and young people who are exposed to family violence. This is especially important at a time when the usual support networks for children and young people, particularly schools, have been disrupted and many families are under increased stress.

These and broader Budget 20 investments place the outcomes of the Strategy at the forefront by addressing causes of child poverty, ensuring children and young people have what they need, and supporting their families.

Click here for a more comprehensive list of funding for child and youth wellbeing related initiatives: <https://childyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/community/your-stories/covid-19-response-and-budget-2020-reflect-ongoing-commitment-child-and-youth>

## Looking ahead

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As we move out of our immediate response to COVID-19, it is clear that efforts to mitigate social and economic impacts and support our communities will require a specific and prolonged approach. Many of the likely adverse social and economic impacts are long term and, in the case of children, may have life-time impacts if not addressed.

The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy will continue to drive government policy to achieve the long term objectives of reducing child poverty and improving child wellbeing. Regular monitoring of impacts will help us respond to any emerging gaps, opportunities or new priorities.

One of the silver linings of COVID-19 is that it's proven our ability to do things differently. Government has moved quickly to implement a range of measures and supports, resulting in significant progress on longstanding issues like digital connectivity and housing the homeless. NGOs, iwi, and Māori and community groups have also led swift and effective response efforts to support their communities. Innovation is flourishing at a local level, and there's been increased and real collaboration, with partnerships and relationships built and strengthened.

We will continue to capitalise on this innovation and collaboration, to help ensure New Zealand becomes the best place in the world for ALL children and young people.