

MEDIA STATEMENT

Embargoed until 12pm Tuesday 28 August

Significant reduction in child poverty possible says Children's Commissioner's expert group

Child poverty in New Zealand can be substantially reduced but requires vision, leadership, collaboration and a lasting commitment, an expert group tasked with finding solutions says.

The Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty, established by the Children's Commissioner, released an *Issues and Options Paper for Consultation* today. The paper contains a package of ideas that the Group want New Zealanders to consider, discuss and give feedback on.

The proposed solutions to child poverty are comprehensive, practical, cost-effective and fiscally responsible, covering both short-term actions and longer-term reforms.

Proposals include ensuring children are living in warm, dry homes by requiring a 'WOF' for rentals, have enough food to concentrate at school through a food in schools programme and are well connected to services that keep them healthy from early in life.

The Group also suggests significant changes to child support, family assistance, housing, health, education and employment policies.

The Expert Advisory group propose setting ambitious, but realistic, targets to reduce child poverty rates by at least 30 percent and to halve severe and persistent child poverty within ten years. Co-chair of the group Professor Jonathan Boston says not only is it possible to reduce child poverty but it is a "must do."

"The incidence of child poverty in New Zealand is unacceptably high. This is widely acknowledged across the political spectrum. Many New Zealanders are also concerned and support action to address child poverty, but so far responses have been piecemeal and poorly coordinated," says Professor Boston.

"We owe it to our children to do much better. Poverty harms children in multiple and significant ways, often for life. It also costs the country billions of dollars in reduced productivity and increased health care costs. We spend lots of money trying to fix the damage done instead of investing adequately up-front and avoiding those costs.

"Many of our proposals are a balance between ensuring families have enough support from the government and supporting them into paid work. All the evidence suggests that employment, especially sustainable and family-friendly work, is the best way out of poverty. This clearly needs to take into account the age and needs of the child and ensure the provision of accessible, adequately subsidized and high quality early childhood education.

A key finding is that early investment in young children is the most cost-effective way to reduce child poverty and mitigate its effects. It is also imperative to address the challenges

facing many larger families. Proposed solutions in the short-term include raising the Family Tax Credit rates for younger and additional children.

In the longer-term, the Group suggests the creation of a 'Child Payment'. This would be a payment from birth for all children, regardless of parental income, but targeted once the child turns six years-old. The payment would be of the highest value while the child is a baby, when costs such as childcare are high, and would decline through childhood.

Co-chair Dr Tracey McIntosh says this payment is about ensuring that children have the best start in life, "investment in the early years has a particularly strong link to better outcomes for disadvantaged children."

Dr McIntosh says another critical measure of a healthy start in life is the quality of housing. She suggests New Zealand's cold, damp housing is having a dire impact on children.

"When you consider young tamariki spend most of their time at home, often in overcrowded and damp conditions, it's not surprising we have such embarrassing rates of diseases like rheumatic fever, pneumonia and whooping cough. Maori and Pasifika families are particularly hard-hit by poor quality housing and often live in over-crowded homes."

The Expert Advisory Group has suggested an increase in the supply and quality of social housing and giving families with pre-school-aged children priority over other applicants. "We also think private landlords need to step up. Half of low-income families live in private rentals and research shows that a significant proportion of those homes are poor quality. Some rentals are not even meeting basic sanitation and safety standards.

"New Zealand hasn't amended its housing quality regulations for existing housing since 1947. We're suggesting the introduction of a Warrant of Fitness for social and private housing to lift the standards in this country," Dr McIntosh says.

Professor Jonathan Boston says the package of solutions will require determination, vision and courage. He welcomes Minister Paula Bennett's recent declaration that "The Government is committed to taking action to combat poverty."

"It's up to us all – government, local communities, business, social agencies, iwi and whanau to step up and take action. New Zealand children deserve our very best efforts on this issue. The costs to them, and the country, are too great to ignore," Professor Boston says.

Ends.

For more information or to request an interview with Professor Jonathan Boston, Dr Tracey McIntosh or other members of the Expert Advisory Group, please contact Anna Santos on 027 696 5101 or a.santos@occ.org.nz

Notes:

- The *Issues and Options Paper for Consultation* is available at www.occ.org.nz. There are also a number of working papers available on this website covering some of the issues in more depth. A summary document of the solutions is also available.

- The Expert Advisory Group on Child Poverty is asking for feedback on the package of proposals in the *Issues and Options* paper over the next six weeks. A series of seminars will be held in the main centres for organisations and individuals. More information at www.occ.org.nz
- In December the Children's Commissioner Dr Russell Wills will receive the final report from the group, which he will then present as advice to the Prime Minister John Key.
- Members of the Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty are (full bios available at www.occ.org.nz):

Co-chairs:

Professor Jonathan Boston - *Acting Director of the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington*

Dr Tracey McIntosh - *Sociology Department, University of Auckland*

Members:

Dr Airini - *Head of School, Critical Studies in Education, University of Auckland*

Dr Fiona Cram - *Researcher, Consultant, Katoa Ltd*

Professor Mark Henaghan

Dean of Law, University of Otago

Professor Philippa Howden-Chapman - *Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington*

Phil O'Reilly - *Chief Executive, Business New Zealand*

Professor Richie Poulton - *Director [Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Research Unit](#) (DMHDRU), Preventive and Social Medicine, Dunedin School of Medicine
Co-Director, [National Centre for Lifecourse Research](#), University of Otago, [Dunedin Study](#)
Theme Leader (Cardiovascular Health)*

Dr James Prescott - *Senior Lecturer in Accounting, Faculty of Business and Law, Auckland University of Technology*

Major Campbell Roberts - *Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit, Salvation Army*

Bob Stephens - *Senior Associate, Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University of Wellington*

Dr Nikki Turner - *General Practitioner, Director of the Conectus Centre and Immunisation Advisory Centre (IMAC), Senior Lecturer in the Division of General Practice and Primary Health Care, University of Auckland*

Sharon Wilson Davis

CE, Strive Community Trust