

## MEDIA STATEMENT

**Embargoed until 6am Tuesday 11 December**

### **More investment needed to reduce cost of child poverty says Children's Commissioner's expert group**

---

Significantly reducing the costly harm of child poverty will require bold actions and far more investment in our children, says the Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty.

The Group, established by the Children's Commissioner in March, released a final report *Solutions to Child Poverty: Evidence for Action* today. The report includes a suite of nearly 80 recommendations, including a 'top ten' priority list.

The final recommendations are comprehensive, realistic and based on the best possible evidence. They incorporate the views of hundreds of New Zealanders, organisations and children and young people who gave feedback on the initial ideas released in August.

Co-chair of the EAG Professor Jonathan Boston says there are actions that the government can take right now to reduce the harm done to children experiencing poverty. "But if we're serious about substantially reducing child poverty rates, then our policy responses will need to be correspondingly ambitious.

"We've set out some recommendations for the longer-term that we fully accept will be costly. But child poverty is already costing taxpayers a large amount of money, and imposing overall economic losses in the realm of \$6 – 8 billion a year. We could keep on this track and accept a lower level of national prosperity. Alternatively, we could invest more now and implement solutions that will improve the outcomes for our children and for our economy and society," Professor Boston says.

"There is no one simple solution. This became very clear during the ten months we've been working on this project. Any reduction to child poverty will only be achieved if we approach it from multiple levels – and take account of the particular inequalities experienced by Māori and Pasifika children and the challenges for sole-parent families.

"As an important first step we need to have a clear plan. We recommend that the government adopt a strategic framework for addressing child poverty. This framework should be backed up by legislation and include short and long-term poverty reduction targets. Without a plan we cannot be sure of progress or success.

"Second, we have a suite of suggestions for reducing some of the worst harm done by poverty that require attention right now. Some of these will require relatively modest financial investment but will have a real impact on the lives of children. The recommendations include a collaborative, nationwide food-in-schools programme in partnership with business and voluntary organizations, and the introduction of a public-

private micro-financing model to help low-income families avoid the need to borrow from 'loan sharks'.

"Thirdly we believe bold measures need to be taken in the longer-term to make a significant difference to the rate of child poverty in this country. Our recommendations include reforms to provide greater support to families with young children and major changes to housing, education, child support and health care policy settings," Professor Boston says.

Co-chair Dr Tracey McIntosh says the final report represents consolidation of the best evidence possible, combined with practical solutions that will work in New Zealand.

"We've spent ten months looking at evidence from here and around the world. Following the release of our *Issues and Options Paper* in August, we spoke to hundreds of people in community seminars around the country. We received over 350 written responses and listened to the views of nearly 300 children and young people.

"The consensus in support of our proposed solutions was remarkable. There is a clear agreement that the first years of life are vitally important, that much of our housing is in a dire state and that education plays a vital role in improving outcomes for children, among many other issues.

"As a result of feedback from children and young people we also added a priority recommendation to our top ten that we had overlooked in our first report. Children told us that missing out on opportunities for play and recreation has a real impact on them. A recommendation has been made to local government that parks and playgrounds should be more welcoming for children - and that free leisure activities should be available - especially in poor communities," Dr McIntosh says.

The report acknowledges that much work is already underway to alleviate child poverty in New Zealand. But Dr McIntosh says now is the time to be more courageous and work together on effective solutions.

"Reducing child poverty will require all of us to make sacrifices, accept difficult choices and be ready to do things differently. We have good evidence on what needs to be done – now we need action."

The *Solutions to Child Poverty: Evidence for Action* will be presented to Children's Commissioner Dr Russell Wills today. The Commissioner will then provide advice to the Prime Minister John Key based on the recommendations in the report.

Ends.

**For more information or to request interviews with members of the Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty please contact Anna Santos on [a.santos@occ.org.nz](mailto:a.santos@occ.org.nz) or 027 696 5101.**

The final report is available at [www.occ.org.nz](http://www.occ.org.nz)

## Actions for reducing child poverty: summary

**The first step:** We have recommended that governments adopt a strategic framework for addressing child poverty issues and ensuring accountability for outcomes. This includes the enactment of legislation requiring the measurement of child poverty, the setting of short-term and long-term poverty-reduction targets, the establishment of various child poverty-related indicators, and the monitoring and regular reporting of results.

**Initial priorities for immediate attention at relatively low-cost:** Second, we have recommended a series of practical, cost-effective and relatively inexpensive measures that will mitigate some of the worst consequences of child poverty. Most of these measures can be implemented quickly and will make a difference to the lives of many children. Their impact on child poverty rates, however, is likely to be only modest.

- pass-on child support payments to sole parents who are on a state-provided benefit (Recommendation 13)
- establish a Warrant of Fitness for all rental housing (both social and private sector) (Recommendation 20)
- support a public-private-partnership micro-financing model with the banking sector and community groups, with the aim of providing modest low-interest and zerointerest loans, as a mechanism to help low-income families access affordable credit and effectively manage debt (Recommendation 48)
- implement a collaborative food-in-schools programme (Recommendation 60)
- support young people who are pregnant and/or parenting to remain engaged in education (Recommendation 63)
- support effective delivery of local services through community hubs (Recommendation 66).

**Initial priorities over the longer-term:** Third, we have recommended a more ambitious package of policy measures designed to reduce child poverty over time to a much lower rate (e.g. at least 30-40 percent below the current rate). These include significant reforms to social assistance programmes, including greater support for low-income families with young children, and major changes to policy settings in the areas of child support, education, housing, health care, and criminal justice. We fully recognise that these changes will be costly. They will require either the reprioritisation of current public expenditure or higher taxes. These are matters for the democratic process to resolve.

- review of all child-related benefit rates and relativities, with a primary goal to reduce child poverty (Recommendation 10)
- create a new, simpler income support payment for families with dependent children allocated to 100 percent of children aged 0 to 5 years inclusive and targeted based on family income from age 6 years onward (Recommendation 11)
- increase the number of social houses by a minimum of 2,000 units per year through to 2020 (Recommendation 22)
- fund free primary care visits for all children 24 hours/7 days a week from birth to

age 5 years inclusive; extending over time to all children to age 17 years inclusive (Recommendation 52).

**Priorities identified by children:** Finally, we consulted with children on the solutions they thought were most important and they identified an action we had missed: it relates to them having the opportunity to play with friends, even if they are poor. For this reason, we have also put forward the following recommendation:

- all local governments ensure that their parks, playgrounds and public spaces are safe and welcoming for children, and free leisure and recreational activities are available, especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Recommendation 72).