

Hon Anne Tolley
Minister for Social Development



**Address to the United Nations Committee on the
Rights of the Child on the Fifth Periodic Report of
New Zealand**

15 September 2016

Speaking points

Madam Chair, distinguished members of the Committee; on behalf of the New Zealand Government, I am honoured to present New Zealand's Fifth Periodic Report under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

I would like to introduce the other members of the New Zealand delegation. They are:

- Maree Roberts Associate Deputy Chief Executive, Ministry of Social Development
- Dr Pat Tuohy Chief Advisor, Ministry of Health
- Andrew Coster Assistant Commissioner, New Zealand Police
- Dr David Wales National Director Special Education, Ministry of Education
- Colm Gannon Specialist Investigator, Department of Internal Affairs
- Dianne Grennell Deputy Chief Executive, Te Puni Kokiri
- Antony Harvey Ministerial Advisor, Office of Hon Anne Tolley
- Fiona Cumming Adviser, New Zealand Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva

Thank you all for the opportunity to present what New Zealand is doing to ensure that our children and young people are in stable and loving families and communities, where they can be safe, strong, connected and able to thrive.

As a country we care about all children and young people and we are committed to improving their well-being, particularly for those that are vulnerable, at risk, or disadvantaged.

The measures New Zealand has adopted between 2011 and 2015 to give effect to the rights in the Convention are set out in the Fifth Periodic Report. The report was informed by consultation with children, non-government organisations and individuals, and included four weeks of public consultation. The completed report was made publicly available to assist civil society in developing non-government sector reports for the Committee's information.

The New Zealand government is committed to giving full effect to the Convention. We have targeted much of our resources to focus on children who face the most risks and who are the most vulnerable.

The Committee's observations provide valuable input into how we can ensure that we care for all our children and young people. We will take the Committee's recommendations on board to make improvements for the protection and promotion of the rights of children in our country.

We are making some far-reaching and fundamental changes to our care and protection system

In early 2015 I appointed an independent expert panel, and a youth advisory panel, to advise me on a complete overhaul of our care and protection system.

I took this step because of concerns that the existing operating model was seriously underperforming and was incapable of delivering on our vision.

The review prioritised the voices of vulnerable children and young people throughout its reflections and design processes.

The panel found that our child protection agency was not effective in intervening early to provide the support that vulnerable children and young people need, and that a fundamental change was required to achieve better outcomes.

The need to do much better for our vulnerable children was starkly highlighted by the results of a study which found that by the age of 21, for children with a care placement who were born in the 12 months to June 1991:

- almost 90 per cent were on a benefit
- around 25 per cent were on a benefit with a child
- almost 80 per cent do not have NCEA Level 2

- more than 30 per cent have had a Youth Justice referral by age 18
- almost 20 per cent have had a custodial sentence
- almost 40 per cent have had a community sentence

Following receipt of the panel's report the Government decided to comprehensively overhaul New Zealand's care and protection system and immediately raise the age of state care and protection to a young person's 18th birthday.

And we are currently assessing whether this should be raised even further, to the age of 21.

We are making transformational change by establishing a new operating model which will be in place by April 2017. It is expected to take up to five years to fully implement all the changes.

The new operating model will focus on five core services – prevention, intensive intervention, care support services, transition support and a youth justice service aimed at preventing offending and reoffending.

A social investment approach will be used to ensure that vulnerable children receive the care and support they need, when they need it. This will use actuarial valuations, early intervention and evidence of what works to identify the best way of targeting support.

By social investment we mean spending money up front to provide better lives for these young people, rather than spending the money later on when they have had terrible experiences.

A new child-centred Ministry will be responsible for providing the core services. It will be called the Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki.

There will be a strong focus on reducing the over-representation of Maori young people in the system. Currently, 60 per cent of children in care are Maori, yet they make up around 25 per cent of all children in New Zealand.

To address the needs of a child that is at risk of harm, the Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki will have the ability to directly purchase vital services, such as trauma support, as soon as they are needed by children.

Legislative changes are currently going through Parliament to raise the age of state care and protection, ensure that children's voices are heard in decisions which affect them, and to establish an independent youth advocacy service.

The independent youth advocacy service will play a significant role in ensuring the voices of children are heard – both in terms of the decisions that affect them, but also as we design systems and processes.

A new Youth Advisory Panel, made up of young people who have experience of state care has been established to provide advice to me and my transformation team as we design the new operating model.

The Government will shortly consider further changes for care leavers as they transition out of the care system, including:

- providing a right to stay in, or return to, care until 21 years of age, and
- meeting the needs of young people in transition up to the age of 25 years.

We are also planning to provide intensive targeted support for caregivers and set standards for the quality of care in placement homes, through National Care Standards.

The panel also recommended raising the age settings of the youth criminal justice system to include 17 year olds. Cabinet directed myself and the Minister of Justice, to investigate and report back on this recommendation. This work is on-going.

Since the last report we have made progress in giving effect to the convention

Our progress is demonstrated by the following illustrative examples.

The Government has strengthened its response to addressing child poverty and its impacts since we last reported. Key examples of this are:

- A \$790 million child material hardship package, which came into effect on 1 April 2016. This raised benefit rates for families for the first time in 43 years, increased tax credit payments for low income working families and increased Childcare Assistance payments. Over half a million children are expected to benefit from these changes.
- \$295 million spent to make State homes warmer, drier and healthier;
- the Warm Up New Zealand programme that has insulated over 146,000 low-income households to make the homes warmer, drier and healthier
- investments to lift educational achievement and target priority learners such as those from low socio-economic backgrounds, along with Māori, Pasifika and students with special education needs

- improved access to primary health care through the 'Zero Fees for Under-13s' policy. From 1 July 2015 free general practice visits and the standard prescription co-payments for children aged under 6 was extended to include all children aged under 13 who are eligible for publically funded health services.

These initiatives demonstrate our commitment to addressing poverty and mitigating its impacts. Our social development agency also regularly reports on a range of income and deprivation measures annually that track our progress over time and I am confident that no country does more to monitor child material hardship and poverty than New Zealand.

The 2016 Household Incomes report was released last week, and shows that:

- Median household incomes grew on average just under 3 per cent each year in real terms between 2011 and 2015;
- There is no evidence of any sustained rise or fall in household income inequality in more than a decade;
- There is some evidence that income inequality has risen after housing costs are taken into account;
- Income poverty is either flat or falling; and
- While still unacceptably high, there has been no rise in poverty and material hardship trends for children in recent years, using any measures.

And this data was collected before the hardship package came into effect earlier this year.

Building on past investments, starting this year we are investing an additional \$200 million over four years to ensure people most in need of social housing have access to accommodation. This will provide at least 750 more places for individuals and families with the most pressing housing needs.

The Childhood Obesity Plan was launched in October 2015. It consists of 22 initiatives and takes a life-course approach to preventing and managing obesity and focuses on interventions in health, education and community settings.

We have improved children's health services, with a strong focus on marginalised groups, particularly those who are not accessing core services.

Government has identified five core services for children aged zero to five that are critical for healthy development and learning. Most families are accessing these services – in fact between 80 per cent and 96 per cent of families are

registered with a midwife or other Lead Maternity Carer, attending Early Childhood Education, and are enrolled in Well Child Tamariki Ora, with a General Practitioner and with a community oral health service.

Our focus now on ensuring the remaining children access those services.

We have also improved child immunisation rates for 8-month-olds to 93 per cent, up from 86 per cent in 2012, and coverage measured by ethnicity highlights that we have greatly closed the gap for Māori. By the age of one year, 95 per cent of all children are fully immunised.

The Prime Minister's Youth Mental Health Project was launched in 2012 as a 4-year phased package of initiatives focusing on 12 to 19 year-olds with, or at risk of developing, mild to moderate mental health issues. It aims to help prevent the development of mental health issues and improve young people's access to services if concerns are identified.

The Children's Action Plan, released in October 2012 and the Vulnerable Children Act enacted in 2014, made the five Chief Executives of key social sector government agencies jointly accountable for developing and implementing a plan to protect New Zealand children from harm, as well as working with families/whānau and communities.

We are progressively establishing Children's Teams in urban and rural communities. These teams address the needs of children who are at risk, but who do not meet the threshold of statutory care intervention.

Through this new way of working, a team of professionals works with the child and develops a single plan that provides the support they need to thrive, achieve and belong – and to stay safe.

The Youth Crime Action Plan has led to substantial reductions in child and youth offending since 2011. The numbers of court appearances of 14 to 16 year olds reduced by 39 percent from the start of 2011 to the end of 2015.

The Government has provided substantial support for the Whānau Ora initiative to deliver services directly to families / whānau.

Whānau Ora is a culturally grounded, holistic, and strength-based approach to improving wellbeing of whānau and addressing children's needs within a whānau context. It places whānau at the centre of service design and delivery.

The approach works well with many Māori and Pasifika families with whom social sector agencies have traditionally struggled to engage.

We are implementing a best practice guideline for use by government agencies in considering the impact of policy and legislation on children and

young people. The guideline includes seeking direct input from children into major policy and legislative proposals.

We are committed to an on-going programme of work with a strong focus on our most vulnerable.

Madam Chair, distinguished Members of the Committee, New Zealand has a strong, long-standing and on-going commitment to giving full effect to the Convention, both domestically and in international settings.

Thank you all for the opportunity to present what New Zealand is doing to deliver on our vision to ensure that our children and young people are in stable and loving families and communities, where they can be safe, strong, connected and able to flourish.

As I have just outlined the New Zealand government is putting in place a new operating model, the Ministry for Vulnerable Children, Oranga Tamariki, that will address the short and long-term wellbeing of at-risk children and support their transition into adulthood. We are actively investigating raising the age settings of the youth criminal justice system to include 17 year olds.

We are focusing on targeting assistance to where it will make the greatest difference including using a newly introduced social investment approach.

We continue to address reducing health service access disparity and reducing educational access and achievement disparity, particularly for marginalised groups.

New Zealand is committed to ensuring that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. To do this we need to particularly focus on those that are vulnerable or at high risk. We recognise that we have more work to do to achieve this and welcome your comments on how we could make further improvements.

I look forward to discussing these areas of progress and other aspects of our performance with the Committee today.

Thank you.