

Lockdown in Waitakere 2021

A snapshot of Visionwest's experience and learnings between 17th August to the 8th October.



Visionwest
Waka Whakakitenga

building hope
together

| *Kia Tūmanakotia*

Introduction

On 17 August 2021, New Zealand went into Alert Level 4 in response to the detection of a case of COVID-19 in the community. Auckland remained at Alert Level 4 for six weeks until 21 September 2021 before moving to Alert Level 3. During this time, New Zealand moved from an elimination to a suppression strategy as the Delta variant spread across Tāmaki Makaurau.

This report describes the impacts of the Alert Level restrictions (lockdowns) on Visionwest service delivery, for both whānau who access Visionwest services and the wider West Auckland community. The emerging priorities for Visionwest are also identified.

It is hoped that by sharing our learnings, government and other stakeholders will have more information about community needs and the challenges facing the non-government organisations that support them.

Visionwest is a non-government organisation that provides services in Auckland, Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Rotorua Lakes and Christchurch.



This report focuses mainly on an 8-week period between 17 August 2021 and 8 October 2021. Key staff across Visionwest were interviewed and service data was analysed (see Appendix One for infographic). A separate report will be available for Home Healthcare services.

The Visionwest Experience

What services did

Visionwest is classified as an essential service. Pātaka Kai (Food Support), Counselling Services, Mātanga Oranga (Kaupapa Māori Trauma-Informed Care), Budgeting Services, Housing, Community Connector and Home Healthcare all continued to operate during the lockdown albeit somewhat differently than before.

The need for food support increased dramatically in the first weeks of the lockdown. Before the lockdown Visionwest supplied an average of 261 food parcels per week. During the lockdown the average was over 1000 food parcels per week—an almost fourfold increase in demand.

Pātaka Kai initially provided food parcels for whānau to pick up from the Visionwest site in Glen Eden. To get food to whānau who were self-isolating and to reduce the risk of COVID transmission they quickly moved to a delivery model where parcels were dropped off to the homes of whānau.

Multiple staff were seconded to support the increased demand for food support. Whānau Centre¹ staff (who normally welcome whānau to Visionwest and connect people to relevant services) manned a rapidly established call centre. They triaged phone calls, connected people to other services where needed and followed up with whānau to check that they were doing okay.

Triage entails maintaining whānau well-being, making sure that whānau feel heard, encouraged, and aware of what supports are available, and helping to meet the needs of every whānau. This will be different for each whānau. For one whānau there could be a connection to counselling or housing or advocacy,

navigating the MSD process or a referral to an external service.

– **Visionwest Staff Member**

The Whānau Centre staff described their role as providing hope in a time that is so difficult for so many.

There are so many [people] experiencing [...] just loneliness and so it's also [...] to provide that companionship.

– **Visionwest Staff Member**

While this team answered phone calls, another team responded to email enquiries for support. Yet another team of staff and volunteers worked as packers and delivery drivers to get food parcels out to whānau.

Budgeting, Counselling and Mātanga Oranga services shifted to virtual delivery modes, engaging virtually with whānau using whatever devices and 'apps' suited people the best. The Community Connector supported people by phone and was also able to check in with whānau as she was part of the Pātaka Kai delivery team.

Visionwest was able to distribute donated Chromebooks and phones to whānau who needed to access to devices for schooling and/or engagement with support services. Care packs were provided to whānau staying in emergency housing and to people engaged in other Visionwest services.

The Housing team continued to support whānau to access emergency accommodation and people who were already part of Visionwest housing and support services. These included people in the Housing First programme, and those staying in motel accommodation (set up in the first lockdown in April 2020) and in Visionwest community housing.

¹ The Whānau Centre is part of Huia Mai. Huia Mai provides Māori-based whānau services designed to meet the needs of whānau Māori and all other whānau who seek support.

How services and staff at Visionwest work

Visionwest staff pride themselves on offering holistic, wraparound supports. Staff described their desire to treat whānau with respect, compassion, and aroha. One client whānau member shared their experience of the Pātaka Kai service:

Visionwest are awesome. I've been treated with utmost care and respect from Day One and wouldn't hesitate to recommend them to anyone in need of their services. I felt whakamaa at first, but the Team's loving style helped to maintain my mana in reaching out for help. God bless you Visionwest.

– **Whānau Member.**

Visionwest staff made considerable effort to connect people to whatever supports might be helpful to them. These may be one or more of the range of Visionwest services, or services of other providers in the community. Visionwest's aim is to support whānau well-being no matter what the presenting need.

Some staff became emotional when they described the passion and commitment of their colleagues. One person shared her pride in working alongside people who are willing to go above and beyond what is required in their roles.

I couldn't be prouder of everybody really. I'm in awe of this large organisation that will just pull together like that. Yeah, just so, so proud of everybody [...] it's over and above. Just so happy to be part of something like this with all the care and love for one another wrapped around [...]. I love all the little random acts of kindness and stuff like that.

– **Visionwest Staff Member.**



An elderly woman (over 90) who lost her home as the result of flooding in Henderson was placed into emergency motel accommodation with the support of Visionwest.

She was already being supported by the Visionwest Home Healthcare service. She was very anxious because her room was on the third floor of a complex and she felt that she had been forgotten about.

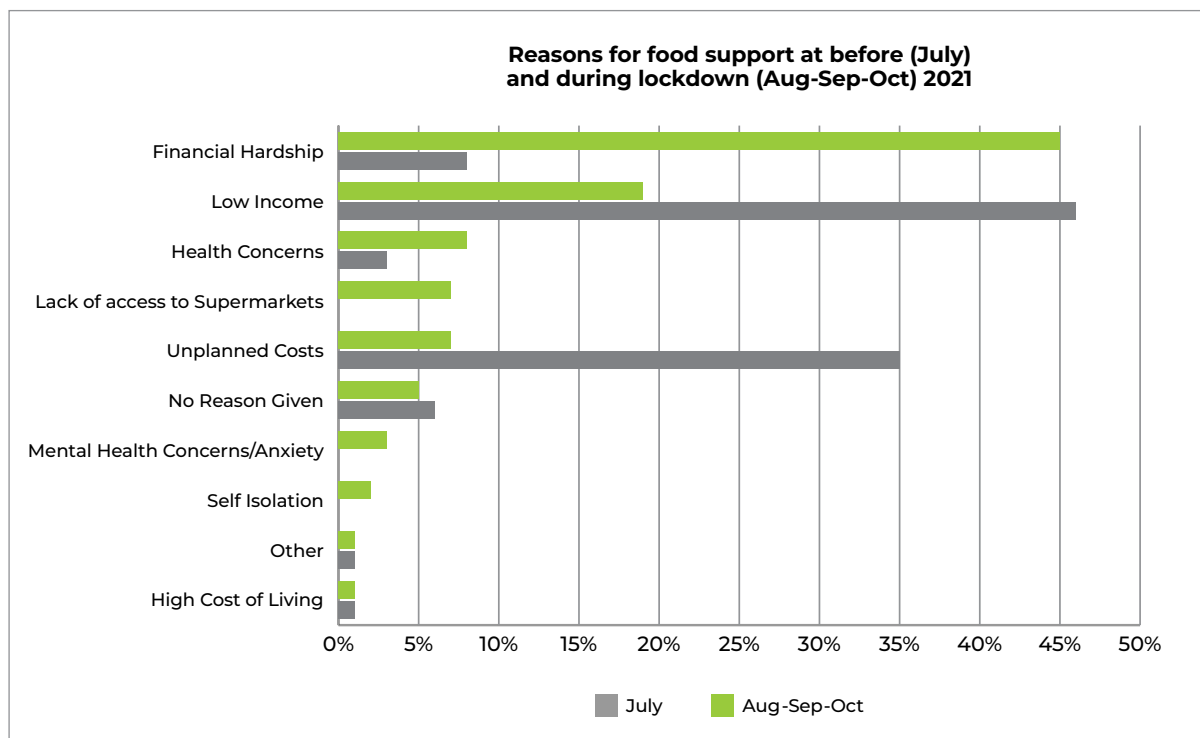
The Visionwest team listened to her concerns and were able to reassure her that the motel management knew where she was and would support her if there was a need to evacuate.

The Home Healthcare team also continued to support her. With tireless advocacy from the Housing Intake team, she has obtained a brand-new apartment in a Kāinga Ora complex in Pt Chevalier.

Whānau and Community Needs

Food support was one of the most obvious needs for West Auckland whānau during the lockdown. The reasons whānau required food support were varied. Figure 1. below summarises the main reasons whānau requested food support before and during the lockdown². There was a large increase in the proportion of people requesting support because of financial hardship—from eight to forty-five percent). These were often people who had never accessed a foodbank before.

Figure 1. Reasons for requesting food support from Visionwest



Financial Hardship

Almost half (46 %) of whānau who accessed food support during the lockdown reported that they were experiencing financial hardship. The wage subsidies did not cover costs for families that were already struggling on a full-time wage prior to the lockdown.

The reason [for seeking food support] is that my husband is on the wage subsidy and before lockdown we were already struggling to get by. Now it's taken a lot more off us and we are struggling more.
 – **Whānau Member.**

Our reason for asking is because we have just lost employment permanently during this lockdown and have used the money we had left to pay our rent and power. This help would be very much appreciated, we wouldn't normally ask for help, I wish I didn't have to. – **Whānau Member.**

Food costs also increased when whānau had to buy more expensive food than normal.

Struggling financially due to supermarket having limited stock & having to buy things I wouldn't normally buy that cost more – **Whānau Member.**

² Low income refers to living on income support from Work and Income.

The number of referrals to the Visionwest budgeting service increased over the lockdown period (n=101). Whānau presented with high levels of financial hardship as many households had gone down to one income or both partners had their income reduced. In such cases the wage subsidy did not cover their basic needs. As a result, whānau were behind in mortgage and consumer debt payments. This took a toll on them financially and also effected their mental health.

Low Income

People living on low incomes such as the Jobseeker Support, NZ Super and Sole Parent Support also sought food support. Food costs increased for many people on low incomes especially if they had children in the household. Some primary school-aged children may have had their breakfast and / or lunch at school. Suddenly that was taken away. Children were eating more at home increasing the costs of the family food bill.

Having the kids home they are eating a lot more than normal so having to spend more on food to get us through the week.

– **Whānau Member.**

People on benefits often believed they had used up all their entitlements to food grants and other financial assistance from Work and Income. As a result, NGOs like Visionwest have become a safety net for community members.

I am not able to get food assistance from WINZ as I have no payment card and my bank account is in overdraft so they will not put cash directly into my bank, they advised me to try food parcel. – **Whānau Member.**

Health Concerns

Eight percent of whānau reported health concerns as the main reason they were requesting food support. Some people shared that they were immunocompromised and could not get food for themselves.

Due to a low immune system, an unfortunate side-effect of radiation treatment, I have been self-isolating for the past 2 weeks. The food I have will last me until Thursday night, and I do not believe I am mentally or physically able to stand in lengthy lines at supermarkets, much less catch a bus because of my fear of this new covid strain and outbreak. – **Whānau Member.**

Lack of access to supermarkets

Some people could not physically get to a supermarket. Single parents with young children and no childcare found shopping very difficult.

Also been finding it hard thru this covid because of having no vehicle, plus 5 children doing daily shopping at our dairy which is super expensive because I can't take all 5 kids into supermarket...

– **Whānau Member.**

New parents were another group who found it challenging to access food.

Just had baby overnight cannot get to shops for kai. – **Whānau Member.**

Unplanned costs

Around seven percent of people requesting support from Pātaka Kai reported unplanned costs. These included having extra whānau staying in the household and / or unexpected bills.

Lockdown happened while family had been visiting. They are unable to leave until lockdown is lifted, extra family members staying is struggling financially. It has taken a toll on me and my family.

– **Whānau Member.**

My oven blew up so I had to purchase a mini oven so I could cook my food—this is not in my budget. – **Whānau Member.**

House fire and lost all of household furniture. – **Whānau Member.**

Mental health concerns and anxiety

Anxiety levels in the community were high. Staff noted that whānau were particularly concerned about the Delta variant. On top of Alert Level 4, the West Auckland community experienced two traumatic events in early September—a terrorist incident in a local supermarket where six people were stabbed and the perpetrator was shot by police (3 September) and severe flooding leading to significant damage to 80 homes (7 September). Some people were simply too afraid to go to the supermarket.

Health issues, financial pressure, self-isolating. Sick children so unable to leave the house. Afraid to go anywhere in case they pick something up while out and bring back to baby. – Whānau Member.

For people already struggling with low mood, depression and/or anxiety, the lockdown has tended to exacerbate these issues according to Visionwest staff.

Staff noted that there were two groups of people: One group who were really itching to get out and do things and feeling like they're very shut in and felt very anxious, and another who were more worried about what will happen next and about others being out and about.

Anxiety / anxiousness would be a fair summary of both of those groups but just for different reasons – Visionwest Staff.

Visionwest has been contacted by people in other parts of Auckland who were concerned about their isolated family members in West Auckland. For example, a daughter was very worried about her father. He was on his own and was an isolator. He had mental health issues. Visionwest arranged for a food parcel to be delivered with ready-made meals inside. They also agreed to check in regularly because: *I just want that girl to know that we're looking out for her dad. – Visionwest Staff.*

Self-isolation

At the beginning of the lockdown several West Auckland schools were locations of interest. Students and their whānau were close contacts and required to self-isolate. Supermarkets were under pressure because many were locations of interests and supermarket staff had to self-isolate. Click and collect and delivery services were not readily available. People who were self-isolating with limited social supports had no way to get food.

We are currently self-isolating due to being at a location of interest at 3 different times from the 22nd August til the 28th August. I've never used these services before and I'd hope that in the future I could be in a position to help. If there is anything available or if you could advise where I could go, I would be greatly appreciated. – Whānau Member.

Conflict and family harm

The restrictions required to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 were incredibly stressful for some whānau. Both children and adults were missing friends and social connection. Some parents struggled having children at home 24/7. The feeling of “no space for me” created frustration and anger which led to parents fighting and arguing with each other. All of the Visionwest services were supporting whānau experiencing family harm.

Challenges

Visionwest staff identified several significant challenges that limited their ability to respond with maximum effectiveness to whānau during the current lockdown.

- The ongoing shortage of permanent housing options which meant whānau remained stuck in unsuitable temporary housing options. Some motel environments were only marginally better than living on the street. Moteliers can ask a resident to leave at any time. This is particularly problematic during a lockdown.
- Some transitional and emergency providers have restrictive policies regarding the amount of time people can spend outside their rooms or units. This can create additional stress and hardship for the people staying there.
- Most emergency housing options were full during the lockdown, so it was difficult to find places for people to stay.
- Supplies of dry goods for Pātaka Kai were a challenge. Stock management was a major burden as it often took two or three weeks to obtain new stock. Panic buying in the early stages of the lockdown also affects the stock available to food banks.
- A lack of digital devices in households and, in some cases, the skills required to use these effectively, means it can be difficult to support people remotely.
- Creditors have been less understanding in the current lockdown which has made it harder to negotiate relief and/or put payment plans in place.
- Whānau are presenting with a high level of consumer debt from Afterpay and Layby. These lending services currently do not come under responsible lending rules and limits.

Emerging Priorities

Pandemic Management and Staff Well-Being

The shift from an elimination to suppression strategy for the management of COVID-19 has significant implications for the way Visionwest operates as an organisation. Visionwest will need to keep operating when staff contract COVID-19 or are required to self-isolate. A new pandemic plan has been developed with the introduction of additional positions plus extra responsibilities for COVID responsiveness within each team. Visionwest was fortunate to secure funding from government to support these developments and works closely with local public health services also.

The recent introduction of vaccine mandates for health and education services places pressure on the Visionwest workforce. Whilst Visionwest can respond, existing pressures on service delivery are compounded.

Staff well-being is another big focus. Visionwest staff members have been working under challenging conditions and will be moving into a new way of operating when they are already tired. A Well-being Manager has recently been appointed and the organisation is making significant investment to support staff.

Supporting vaccination for Māori whānau in West Auckland

Māori leaders from Visionwest are part of a West Auckland Māori Collective. The Collective is a collaboration of groups who offer Kaupapa Māori services or are developing these. The Collective meets regularly to share knowledge and concerns. An area of concern is the low vaccination rates for Māori whānau.

There's a real concern that there could be an epidemic amongst Māori that doesn't hit other ethnic groups the same, and so I think that's a concern that is shared often. I was surprised about [...] the lack of Māori in governance spaces means that the decisions that are made don't necessarily reflect Māori understanding, and so this kind of desire to see more Māori in places of governance and political influence.

– **Visionwest Staff**

Visionwest has been contracted by Te Puni Kokiri to promote vaccination for Māori in West Auckland. In addition, Visionwest is supporting all staff and whānau to get vaccinated. Staff are available to talk to anyone who contacts Visionwest about the importance of vaccination and to address any questions or concerns.

[J]ust being able to as an organisation to answer those questions and listen to the feelings behind the vaccine or what's going on or what that might mean or look like for them. Or helping to minimize that anxiety and those pressures they may be feeling.

– **Visionwest Staff**

Housing

The shortage of affordable, quality housing options for whānau in West Auckland continues to be a huge challenge. High rents contribute to ongoing financial hardship, overcrowding and stress. The lack of affordable housing means many whānau stay for far too long in unsuitable emergency and transitional housing. Poor quality housing negatively impacts on people's physical and mental well-being.

Visionwest is exploring long-term options for increasing social housing and enhancing service delivery to better respond to the whānau we serve.

In the interim, there is an urgent need for government to:

- Rapidly convert transitional housing places and contracts (where appropriate) into long-term social housing and, where appropriate, continue wraparound support for those who will benefit from it.
- Invest much more across the housing continuum into all forms of stable housing tenure.
- Fast track partnerships with the community sector to build bespoke and localised housing solutions adapted to community needs.

Food Support

The current lockdown has reinforced the importance of food support for whānau facing material hardship. However, this response does not address the financial hardship which drives increasing levels of food insecurity.

While there is a spike of need during lockdowns, the level of demand never returns to the pre-lockdown level. The baseline level of need in the community rises and is sustained indicating increased hardship. For example, pre-COVID, Visionwest provided an average of 150 food parcels per week. Before the August

lockdown, the average was 260 per week. After the current lockdown Visionwest expects an increased baseline level of demand to continue. Visionwest is exploring how it can meet this increased demand for food support when seconded staff return to their normal roles as restrictions ease.

Government support for Business Continuity Planning to ensure the supply of dry goods when areas of the country go into lockdowns would be very helpful in the future.

Changes to service delivery

Staff across different services (Counselling, Mātanga Oranga, Community Connection, Budgeting) reported that they have become more comfortable using a range of technology over the course of the lockdown. They have also developed creative ways to meet the needs of the whānau they work alongside. The ability to deliver services online has created more choice and options for some whānau who may prefer to interact online instead of face-to-face. However, for people with the least resources in the community, lack of access to internet and digital devices continues to reinforce inequities. Arguably low cost wi-fi options and grants for digital devices are essential requirements for community participation.

Summary

The 2021 lockdowns in Tāmaki Makaurau have again highlighted both the acute and chronic hardship experienced by many people in West Auckland. Low wages and low benefit rates plus expensive and often low quality housing mean that people have limited financial resources to fall back on in a crisis.

Appendix 1: Service delivery during 2021 lockdowns

In the first 8 weeks of the Level Four and Three Restrictions
 Visionwest services provided:

PĀTAKA KAI FOOD SUPPORT

260 

FOOD PARCELS PER WEEK
BEFORE LOCKDOWN

10000+

FOOD PARCELS PER WEEK
DURING LOCKDOWN

The main
 reasons for
 requesting
food support
 during the
 lockdown

- 46%** Financial Hardship
- 19%** Low Income
- 8%** Health Concerns
- 7%** Lack of Access to Supermarkets
- 7%** Unplanned Costs

WELLBEING SUPPORT

160



COUNSELLING
 SESSIONS

BUDGETING SUPPORT

442

BUDGETING
SUPPORT SESSIONS



101

PEOPLE REFERRED TO
BUDGETING SERVICES

COMMUNITY HOUSING SUPPORT



400

PEOPLE PLUS PARTNERS
AND CHILDREN SUPPORTED
IN HOUSING SERVICES

WHĀNAU SUPPORT

160+

SUPPORT CONTACTS
BY MĀTANGA ORANGA



220+

SUPPORT CONTACTS BY
COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS



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