

Covid-19 2021 Delta Outbreak Noho Rāhui:

A Snapshot from the community-based social services perspective

October 2021

He Kupu Whakataki

As a membership-based peak body for Aotearoa’s community-based social service organisations and people working in social services, Social Service Providers (SSPA) represents over 200 member organisations and affiliate members. Our members are working alongside children, rangatahi, families and whānau every day, and they include kaupapa Māori and Iwi organisations, and organisations of diverse expertise and size, in both regional and urban locations.

This paper provides a snapshot of insights drawn from SSPA’s mahi with a range of our member organisations during August-September 2021, during the Delta Covid-19 outbreak and noho rāhui.



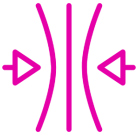



SSPA supports the kaupapa of the government’s Covid-19 response focused on elimination to-date. This has protected the lives of tamariki, rangatahi, whānau and communities throughout the motu, especially whānau Māori, people with disabilities and health conditions, and people with heightened vulnerability to Covid-19. We acknowledge the significant ongoing impacts of Covid-19 on Aotearoa’s children, rangatahi, whānau, communities and those working in the community as essential workers throughout noho rāhui, including our SSPA members.

Key challenges at-a-glance

Children, rangatahi, families & whānau

 Poverty, including lack of money, food, power & connectivity	 Insecure housing	 Household transmission, isolation/quarantine requirements
 Insecure employment, unemployment	 Anxiety & other mental health challenges	 Isolation & loneliness
 Family harm & violence	 Discrimination experienced by people with mask-wearing exemptions	 Extended time away from school, kura & community activities

Community-based social service providers

 Challenges & risks of new Delta working environment	 Kaimahi fatigue & mental health	 Continued adaptation of provision of services
 Ongoing funding gap & cost pressures	 Workforce pressures - pay equity, staff retention	 Vaccination of workforce

Particular issues for Tāmaki Makaurau

- Pasifika families hard-hit by the Delta outbreak
- Access to food - food scarcity, high numbers of supermarkets locations of interest
- Workforce pressures - larger numbers of workers isolating due to new contact requirements and hundreds of locations of interest
- Workforce pressures – long-term fatigue, kaimahi resilience wearing down due to multiple lockdowns over past 18 months



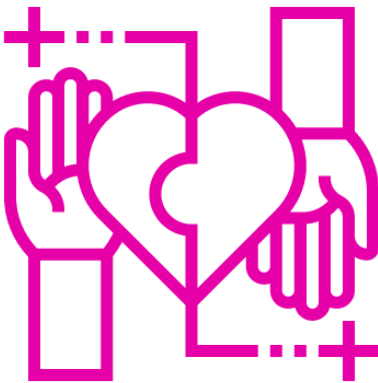
Ka mua ka muri, looking back to look forward

During 2020's national Alert Level 4 noho rāhui and subsequent lockdowns in Tāmaki Makaurau, we saw the incredible adaptability, innovation and resilience of community-based social service providers. SSPA members and other community social service providers undertook essential and challenging work during lockdowns and were able to meet many of the needs of their communities, grounded in their deep local relationships based on inclusion, non-judgement, partnership and trust.



Another key ingredient looking back that was fundamental to the Covid-19 response during noho rāhui in 2020 was the collaborative, flexible and high-trust working approach between government agencies and social service providers. This enabled fast and effective response for our communities, and showed there could be different ways of working together, beyond the normal business-as-usual approaches. This different way of working together was a source of hope for community-based social service providers, who saw the possibilities of working in alternative and increasingly adaptive, collaborative and enabled ways into the future.

SSPA and our members have seen that entrenched inequity and disadvantage was compounded by the challenges of lockdown periods and changes in alert levels during 2020. In April 2020, member organisations of SSPA shared information and insights of what they were seeing amongst the families and whānau that they were working to support, and how they responded during the nationwide noho rāhui. This paper, *How families and communities are faring under lockdown: a snapshot, April 2020*, can be read [here](#). Following the national lockdown in 2020, SSPA also co-produced with our members the *SSPA Agenda for Change: Big Ideas to Tackle Big Problems*, available [here](#).



On 17 August 2021, all of Aotearoa New Zealand moved to Alert Level 4, following community transmission of the Delta strain of Covid-19. Now, Aotearoa experiences another lockdown period with differing Alert Levels within Aotearoa. Tāmaki Makaurau is experiencing longer periods at higher and more restrictive Alert Level settings, in an effort to reduce and break Delta transmission. At the time of writing this paper, New Zealand's elimination strategy is now transitioning with

vaccination of the population a key priority. Communities around Aotearoa are living in a climate of constant change in relation to the pandemic. This snapshot paper summarises what social service providers have told us they are seeing amongst the families and whānau they are working with, and how their organisations are responding and managing during this latest period of noho rāhui.

Overall view of the Delta outbreak noho rāhui from a community-based social services perspective

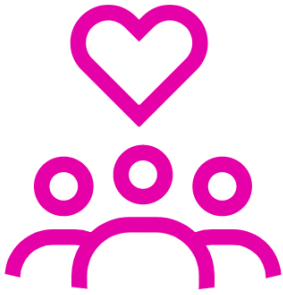
As Aotearoa entered the Delta Alert Level 4 lockdown, SSPA member organisations were quickly able to re-activate workplace and workforce systems set up for past noho rāhui. However, this noho rāhui is definitely harder for community-based social service providers than before.

This is due to a combination of factors, including: the higher transmissibility of the Delta variant and the risks that go along with this for children, rangatahi, families and whānau, as well as for individual kaimahi and organisations; fatigue from previous lockdowns and the continued pandemic response since; deepening pockets of inequality; and the continued challenges of providing community-based social services in te ao hurihuri. These factors have meant reworking of workforce plans and systems, changes to working arrangements, increased and surge demand for services, combined with the ever-evolving ripple effects of the outbreak, especially in Tāmaki Makaurau, and now in regions such as Te Tai Tokerau and Waikato.

“At one level we are doing ok - all the things we learned last time have stood us in good stead. But we think it does feel harder this time around. Some of that's the Delta virus and some of it I think reduced energy levels not fuelled by the adrenaline of dealing with something new like it was last March”.

– SSPA Member





This noho rāhui, our members are experiencing many of the same issues as in 2020 (see our [Snapshot for 2020](#)), but this time they are seeing a greater demand than they can sometimes meet for whānau and communities they work with.

SSPA members also report seeing growing pressures in terms of food security, poverty and inequality, anxiety and other mental health struggles, unemployment and family violence amongst the families and whānau they are working alongside. Access to the basics of food and power, as well as lack of digital/telecommunications connectivity have also been challenges faced by some families and whānau again during this noho rāhui.

New challenges have emerged through children and families being at home for much longer periods of time away from school and daily life, especially in Tāmaki Makaurau. This is creating compounding stress for many households, especially those that had pre-existing stressors. We also note the deep impact of Delta on communities including the Pasifika community in Tāmaki Makaurau. Many SSPA member organisations have been working 24/7 providing culturally inclusive and responsive frontline health and social services to Pasifika and other communities, including Tāmaki Makaurau’s homeless rangatahi and wider homeless communities.

“Compared to other outbreaks, this one in particular has hit close to home and with the extra cautious approach being taken around close contacts, just about everyone up here in Tāmaki will know of a household that is self-isolating (including mine right now!). This obviously affects the practitioners and professionals in our network but also the community more generally. Those households that are self-isolating are reliant on others to drop off groceries, etc, and there will likely be many households who are isolated and vulnerable right now.”

– SSPA Member

To meet the needs of communities, social service providers are working in different ways with children, rangatahi, families and whānau. There has been innovation with services and support driven by local community needs in ways that are culturally and locally responsive, to ensure communities are safe, fed and cared for and able to get through isolation periods. The agility and innovation that providers are demonstrating through working together to support children, rangatahi, whānau and families shows there are different ways of working to support communities.

This is also seen in the vaccine rollout, with communities working together to assist with local vaccination programmes. Many SSPA member organisations are directly involved in supporting the national vaccination effort, ensuring that their local communities can learn about and access the vaccine from trusted sources.

However, the vaccine and corresponding ethical questions that have arisen relating to health and safety for workplaces, and for the people who social service providers work with, are questions that NGO social services are having to actively work through. Helpful guidance has been provided by Oranga Tamariki in relation to [vaccination of young people in care](#), but ongoing questions remain about vaccination of the NGO social services workforce. This issue would benefit from Government clarification.



A closer look at some of the key issues

Workplace wellbeing

The holistic wellbeing of staff is of huge concern for SSPA member organisations. We know that kaimahi were already fatigued going into this noho rāhui and that this time around feels much harder for many. Although many providers had strong systems in place from 2020, the added stress of Delta and high numbers of contacts in Tāmaki Makaurau especially, has made it challenging to cope with the constant change that lockdowns and Alert Level changes bring.

SSPA has been focusing on supporting our member kaimahi whānau by proactively sharing mental health and wellbeing messaging and resources on a weekly basis. Together with ComVoices and Umbrella Wellbeing, we provided SSPA members and the wider community social service sector with a free webinar during Mental Health Awareness Week 2021, called *Strengthening Wellbeing in Times of Uncertainty*. Zeenah Adam, a registered clinical psychologist facilitated this and over 150 kaimahi attended from around the motu. SSPA published a companion follow-up resource, [here](#).

“My sense from the conversations we are having is that this time organisations in our sector are better prepared for the operational aspects of a Lockdown, but it is harder for organisations to manage staff wellbeing, which is a trend we have seen since the last lockdown.”

– SSPA Member

Workforce capacity

The virulence of the Delta variant has meant that staffing and workforce pressures have been a significant aspect of day-to-day operations in NGO social service provider organisations, especially in Tāmaki Makaurau. This has been caused through the greater numbers of locations of interest and more staff members therefore required to isolate, and also as family members may be contacts and so isolation requirements are/were in place for households. This has had a kick-on effect for workforce capacity. Contingency plans have had to be put in place and activated by many providers. This was especially apparent during August and September 2021.

“We are doing some more detailed contingency planning in relation to our workforce as we want to protect against possible staff shortages if a number of our staff need to self-isolate.” (As expected, all our staff are working from home with face to face work only happening in urgent or emergency situations.) We do have a small list of staff who have volunteered and are willing to do face to face work in urgent situations for other agencies if needed”

– SSPA Member

We have heard from SSPA members organisations that run community-based care where are especially conscious about these staffing pressures. Many are working together to team-up on contingency plans, and SSPA has worked closely with Oranga Tamariki and our members to support understanding of local need.

Some of our members have highly detailed lockdown workforce plans in place including a Covid fund put aside, however, this is not possible for others. We have seen among our members the value of individual provider organisations reaching out to one another, especially those continuing to undertake front line service delivery during noho rāhui. They have been offering support to one another, and sharing staffing resources with the wider sector if needed.



Working with government agencies & Covid-19 related costs



Using learning from the 2020 lockdowns, Oranga Tamariki and Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora Ministry for Social Development have streamlined their Delta outbreak communications to community-based social service providers. MSD is providing centralised updates on behalf of government agencies that provide social service funding to community partners. This has worked effectively, meaning SSPA members and other providers have had one key channel to expect and receive key information from.

Unlike in 2020, specific financial resources have not been provided for NGO social service providers to draw on during the Delta outbreak to address cost pressures they are experiencing as a result of lockdown. This is despite there having been additional costs incurred by providers, from, for example, having to backfill front line staff who have to isolate, and covering extra costs for families and whānau in need. SSPA welcomes the ongoing kōrerorero with Oranga Tamariki and MSD about how providers can be assisted with offsetting some of these costs.

Another issue raised by our members during the outbreak has been that some extra time to undertake business-as-usual reporting would be helpful, to alleviate some pressure given Covid-19 related workloads. Oranga Tamariki has been responsive to these calls, confirming in September that extra time would be permitted for some reporting to be undertaken by partners. This was strongly welcomed by SSPA members.

Vaccination

SSPA strongly supports the national vaccination effort, and believes it is imperative that as many people in Aotearoa who can be vaccinated are able to get vaccinated. This is particularly important to protect whānau Māori, people with disabilities and underlying health conditions, our youngest children and tamariki, and those who are at particular risk of the virus due to pre-existing socio-economic inequities. SSPA has been actively engaging with our members about vaccination, and we have been sharing credible information about the vaccine and encouraging our members to get vaccinated. As already mentioned, many SSPA member organisations are directly involved in delivery of the vaccine and related support services in their communities.

Issues related to vaccination are live and will continue to evolve for SSPA member organisations. The challenges regarding vaccination are multifaceted for community-based social service providers. These include:

- Significant concerns about the *lagging rates of vaccination among some Māori*, and *high levels of vaccine hesitancy among rangatahi Māori* due to spread of misinformation.
- *Employer health and safety obligations* – providers have raised questions about how they are supposed to be dealing with staff who are reluctant to be vaccinated, and the related risks concerning staffing and ethical questions about kano ki te kano engagement with children, rangatahi, families and whānau.
- *The question of whether the vaccine mandate relating to health providers and disability workers applies to NGO social service providers* – SSPA has written to joint Government ministers in October seeking clarification.
- It has been highlighted that *staff who cannot or who choose not to become vaccinated will have an impact on workforce capacity*, with some families and whānau having an expectation that any community-based social service worker who enters their whare will be vaccinated.



Children, rangatahi, families & whānau

The Delta outbreak has been felt differently by families and whānau depending on their specific situation. We note the differential experiences that have occurred for some Pasifika families in Tāmaki Makaurau due to the transmission of the virus, and the inequities that existed for some families and whānau which have been exacerbated by another long period in lockdown.

SSPA members have shared that for families and whānau who they are working alongside in the Delta outbreak, the challenges include ongoing and new impacts of poverty and household insecurity, related issues of access to food, power and digital connectivity, housing insecurity, loss of employment, mental health, household stress and family violence. Anxiety and fear of Covid-19 is also a strong factor that is present, and this includes for many children and rangatahi. For families and whānau who have had to isolate, these issues have been compounded.

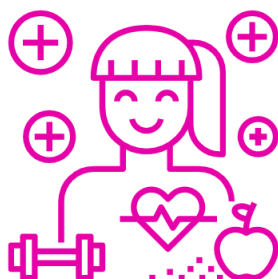
“Knowing it was also only a matter of time before we had another lockdown, the conversations with our families and in preparing for another one has been ongoing.”

– SSPA Member

“Like last time we are having to make sure the families we work with have enough of the basics e.g food, power etc to get by”

– SSPA Member

Food insecurity issues have proven a constant challenge for whānau and families, and many community-based social service organisations have pivoted during the outbreak to ensure families and whānau can access food. Food parcels remain a major focus of efforts for some providers. Given logistical issues and strain of parcel provision, some of our members are providing supermarket vouchers instead of food parcels, only to those whānau who are able to safely access supermarkets. In Tāmaki Makaurau given the wide reach of the outbreak, even just getting to the dairy or supermarket has become more difficult for many families and whānau, especially those needing to isolate, including some social service provider organisations’ staff. Some of our members have been active in mobilising further support in safe and also culturally responsive ways, including working with Pasifika families directly affected by Delta.



With Tāmaki Makaurau experiencing a longer period at Alert Levels 4 and 3 and the wider spread of the Delta variant, this is meaning higher levels of anxiety about Covid-19 and the future, and longer time away from school, kura and community activities. Many Auckland schools have been directly affected by Delta cases too. Having access to inclusive and responsive mental health support is really important for children, rangatahi and parents and caregivers at this time, including for children and young people in state care. Children and young peoples’ lives, relationships and safe spaces have been significantly disrupted, and many have concerns about the future.

Positively, many children and rangatahi are reaching out for help when they need it. For example, Barnardos reports that their 0800 What’s Up helpline experienced a significant increase in calls from children and rangatahi during the first few weeks of the Delta lockdown. Many children and young people called and spoke to a counsellor about how hard lockdown is, and their anxiety and worries relating to Covid-19. Over more recent weeks these call levels have continued rising, highlighting the significant need that exists.



Titiro whakamua, Thinking ahead

With the pandemic now having entered a new phase in Aotearoa New Zealand, this is bringing greater risk for children, rangatahi, families and whānau—especially those already experiencing inequities. Our members are conscious of the potential for family harm, suicide and other mental health impacts as the situation continues evolving, and in the aftermath of the outbreak. The wider spread of the Delta strain also raises significant challenges for our community-based social services—at organisational levels and at the individual social service kaimahi level. It is vital that the Government and other key decision-makers take these factors into account in the continued pandemic response.

SSPA advocates for the following to be kept central in decision-making relating to COVID-19:

- The health and wellbeing of whānau Māori, Pasifika families, people with disabilities and underlying health conditions, those who cannot be vaccinated—including young children and tamariki—and a commitment to ensuring equitable outcomes now and on an intergenerational basis, including grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
- Locally-generated collaborative approaches, and adaptive, creative solutions. Government as an enabler, through high-trust relationships and flexible funding of services driven by what communities need, so families and whānau are supported to chart their own course and thrive.
- A focus on mental health. Coming out of lockdown can also bring high levels of anxiety and stress. It's imperative to promote and make available responsive mental health support for children, rangatahi, families and whānau.
- Urgently ensuring adequate household incomes for families, whānau and youth in the toughest situations, including those living in poverty, homeless, accessing welfare support payments and in low-income, insecure employment.
- Ensuring the full range of rights to all children and tamariki under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Government social sector agencies could each appoint a focal point for coordination of children's issues and Covid-19.
- Clarity about kaimahi vaccination for the community-based social service workforce, to provide certainty. The focus needs to be on ensuring services remain accessible, keeping people and workers safe and preventing transmission.

The SSPA [Agenda for Change](#) highlights approaches to many of the big challenges facing us. It is an invitation for government, the community sector and providers to work together for transformation. SSPA also believes the following will be important from a social sector perspective as we think ahead:

- Focusing on caring for our workers, and responding to social service kaimahi mental health and fatigue. There must be adequate support for community-based social service kaimahi to access effective mental health and wellbeing support. This will support social service outcomes and strengthen the workforce for the future.
- A funding boost in Budget '22 for community-based social service providers, to ensure NGO, Iwi and kaupapa Māori social service providers are more fairly and sustainably funded, to cover the true costs of delivering social services.
- Government commitment to a whole-of-sector settlement of the pay equity claim for people in NGO and Iwi social service roles, to alleviate the widening pay gap and workforce pressures on provider organisations.
- Continued tangible progress on the Future of Social Sector Commissioning Project, and whole-of-government support for an approach to social sector commissioning grounded in relationships of high trust to enable intergenerational family and whānau wellbeing.

Find out more about SSPA or get in touch

- Find us online @ sspa.org.nz
- Follow us on Facebook @ facebook.com/SocialServiceProvidersAotearoa
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Nau Mai, Haere Mai ki te roopu o SSPA - we welcome applications to join SSPA as full or affiliate members throughout the year.

Find out more about becoming a SSPA member @ sspa.org.nz/join-us/become-a-member

