

INSIGHTS FROM KOHA KAI PROVIDERS COVID-19 LOCKDOWN 2021



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ngā mihi nui

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2020, Hutt City Council and Healthy Families Hutt Valley surveyed emergency food providers to capture learnings from the March 2020 COVID-19 Level 4 Lockdown. This resulted in the [From Food Parcels to Food Resilience](#) report which presented insights and future considerations regarding the pandemic response and food insecurity in our community.

In August 2021, we again experienced a national Level 4 COVID-19 Lockdown which led to the creation of the Hutt Valley Emergency Kai Collective (later changed to Te Awa Kairangi Kai Collective). In October 2021, a similar survey was conducted asking for experiences and observations from the first day of Level 4 Lockdown to the months that followed. The survey included these prompt questions:

- Were there barriers to getting support from the Ministry of Social Development, Emergency Operation Centre (Welfare) and Council?
- What other barriers did you face or notice?
- What worked well in providing kai to our community?
- What differences have you noticed between this Lockdown and last year's Lockdown?
- What support do you think could be beneficial to our community at present?
- Any other comments?

For the purposes of this report, we refer to 'koha kai distributors' to describe the range of providers who arranged and distributed kai to people in the community during the COVID-19 Lockdown 2021 and who shared their learnings with us. This acknowledges the te ao Māori view of providing kai as a gift or the act of sharing, that does not depend on eligibility or criteria.



INSIGHTS

This section provides summary statements, themes and quotes that emerged from survey responses and conversations. It presents combined responses from the six prompt questions under three broad headings: the challenges, what worked well and what more can we do.

THE CHALLENGES

There was a suddenness to the 2021 COVID-19 Lockdown that caught many people by surprise. The gradual unfolding of both a different and unchanged emergency response system added a layer of uncertainty, confusion and stress for koha kai distributors and whānau. In the early days of the Lockdown, it was unclear what support was available for agencies and whānau, with confusing pathways to access support. There was also a greater need in the community as the 2021 Lockdown generated an additional burden to those who had not fully recovered from the previous Lockdown in 2020; alongside a new cohort of whānau who became food insecure.

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There were more people coming forward and more middle-income people coming forward. There were requests for a family of 6 to find there were more people in the house when delivering. People were apologising for having more people in the house.

Harder emotionally and mentally this time. People were upset having to ask for help or go to a foodbank. A family reliant on contract work quietly asked for help in the school yard.

The need came harder and faster because our community isn't anywhere near as robust as it was before COVID-19. This lockdown stuff is landing on multiple crises already, particularly rent and housing and the lack of day-to-day income people have without COVID-19.

We came across whānau who had nothing in their homes.

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There was an assumption that the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) response would be the same as what was provided during the Lockdown in 2020. However, differences included:

- Less support and funding didn't flow as freely.
- The resource to support foodbanks was slower and there was less kai to distribute.
- People in financial hardship were encouraged to apply for a food grant through Work and Income which was a barrier for some people.
- Work and Income were referring clients to foodbanks which were initially under-resourced.

It was acknowledged that further into the Lockdown, MSD were proactive in contacting foodbanks to provide funding top-ups as resources started to flow.

There was also an assumption that the Emergency Operation Centre (EOC) welfare response system would have adapted to a pandemic scenario to better support a food response. While there were some who found it supportive, others did not. Feedback included:

- It was unhelpful that the EOC could only offer kai support to those who were isolating at home due to having COVID-19 and not for someone who couldn't access kai for financial reasons.
- No contact or understanding of what the EOC had to offer.
- Did not engage with the EOC reimbursement system due to the process and time involved.

A point was made that large well-resourced Government organisations were referring whānau to small and under-resourced volunteer community groups.

“ *[Government Agency] were asking us to send pre-packaged meals but where is the role of agencies that aren't traditionally in the food space, where are their responsibilities with this stuff?* ”

Information about locally available food support was not readily accessible to those who did not have the technology or access to the internet as well as those for whom English is a second language. This was coupled with a lack of support for those who needed help to navigate technology and understand the process to access kai.

The volunteer workforce was made up of predominately older people, many of whom were immune-compromised; and women, which presented challenges for the heavy lifting involved in handling stock and delivering food parcels.

There was a lack of appropriate vehicles and equipment (forklifts) for distribution and handling.

Some facilities were too small to ensure social distancing, which meant that some services could not operate.

Food was more expensive; less available and rescue food was often of poorer quality. It was noted that in 2020, there was more food available due to cancelled export orders being fed back into New Zealand's food system.

There were regulatory barriers to accessing fruit and vegetables from growers in Ōtaki.

The New Zealand Food Network distribution system did not deliver as some were expecting it to. It mainly redistributed surplus stock rather than acquiring food that was needed and wanted. There were also operational issues with deliveries and distribution.



If we are talking about resilience in a crisis then funding needs to be dropped at a regional level. So that we can activate for ourselves, using the strengths of our own region, thinking about circular economies because it is not just about that food parcel landing in that household, it is also about ensuring that our local food businesses are kept alive. We can't do that if everything is distributed out of Auckland.



There was a lack of social support to go with the kai support for some whānau. Issues mentioned were: whānau coping with bereavement during Lockdown, mental health challenges, isolation and loneliness.



It wasn't enough to be putting food parcels together and sending them down the road because there was also a whole lot of people that had particular care needs who - during lockdown - lost their support networks. We came across some really awful stories like the blind guy that lost his caregiver who is suddenly left to try and cook for himself.

For some - kai was the least of their worries!

The sheer volume of people that we supported and continue to support was different too. More aware of the other needs beyond the food parcel. We need to understand what happens to all the other support people during this period. The guy with throat cancer whose support person isn't able to be there or get to the supermarket, so he is trying to buy soup online which was just completely out of reach for him, and he ended up four days without food.

There are gaps. We noticed a lot of gaps with high health need users.

Sometimes being a foodbank only organisation ... makes it more difficult as we're not able to provide wrap around support.

There are complex food needs. The support networks that fell away would know of those issues, but it isn't always passed on. They are expecting the foodbanks to solve that problem. So, we had way more calls to us asking us to solve complex problems.



WHAT WORKED WELL

A noteworthy theme was the paradox that the slower and muddled central Government response was met by a quicker and more cohesive community response. This came from necessity, passion and wanting to do things better than the previous Lockdown.



Slowness in Government response meant community had to activate at a local level.

This time around the activation with community was so much easier than last year, in all spaces, around the foodbanks themselves being willing to collaborate as they were not in the space to be able to do that last year, but also when we started to send our comms out to the community saying we are doing this and we needed help, the response was pretty amazing.

Services from around the Valley were visible and set up kai banks all over. The multi-media link i.e., Facebook/emails/phone calls were very clear as to where to go for help.

Everyone was better prepared and just kicked into action.

There was more local distribution rather than from Wellington.

There was a stronger desire to work together. The call out to help from the community brought a good response.



Hutt City Council was also acknowledged for its role in the response including:

- Providing supportive leadership which allowed an organic community-led response to emerge.
- Reaching out and sharing of information.
- Supporting the response with people resource and vehicles for transportation. Some would have liked more of this.



THE HUTT VALLEY EMERGENCY KAI COLLECTIVE

There were many comments that were specific to the Hutt Valley Emergency Kai Collective which was formed in the early days of Lockdown 2021 and this is a summary of what worked well in relation to the Collective:

- A more coordinated response
- Communication was easier and there was an increased awareness of available support
- A shared assessment process
- An easier referral process between organisations and localities
- Increased access to Council support, vehicles, personnel and funding
- Provision of quality fruit and vegetables
- Bulk purchasing of items
- Sharing of donated supplies including masks, nappies, milk powder, bread and meat
- Lower Hutt Foodbank contributing their resources when they had to close down
- Being part of a supportive group that could help problem-solve and provide peer support.



This lockdown was doable. This was due to having plans in place and being part of the Kai Collective.

The Common Unity/Kōkiri partnership formed during the previous lockdown was a model of what could be done and became the backbone for this time round.

Access to fruit and veges has been great – very helpful not to have to buy and shop for it. An outcome has been that some whānau joined the local Fruit and Vegetable Co-op because they liked having fruit and vegetables.

Been brilliant having support and help with problem-solving. Knowing who could support without searching and lots of phone calls. This time the whole community stepped up and we didn't feel alone, it has been a wonderful journey, very rewarding supporting whānau from all walks of life.

The Collective allowed groups to understand how other food groups operate, this brought about respect and appreciation for other groups. We often had the same beliefs and core values. Trust, understanding, and communication was built through the process.





We have benefited from hearing about how others are working to reflect on how we can work in a mana-enhancing way.

Through this time the Emergency Kai Collective was 'birthed'. This promises to be a collaboration that goes beyond this time of emergency and moving our whole community to new places in terms of food resilience.



Distinctive factors that contributed to the success of the Hutt Valley Emergency Kai Collective included:

- The dissolving of barriers between organisations and the building of trust. This included greater trust and collaboration between kaupapa Māori organisations and non-kaupapa Māori organisations. A key element to this was getting to know each other better and having shared values which underpinned the mahi.
- The willingness to compromise and change operational models to come to an agreed assessment process.
- Mutual and personal support.
- The common commitment to provide 'quality and healthy' food to whānau – not just redistributing leftover or donated food.
- The desire to meet the ongoing needs of whānau beyond emergency situations.

WHAT MORE CAN WE DO?

A common theme from this question was the heightened awareness of the ongoing and complex needs of whānau that could be addressed through koha kai engagement. There were also reflections on how the practice of koha kai is linked to issues such as equity, resilience, sustainability, healthy eating and the wider food system.



Assistance available for those who have had a change in their employment. Making it easier for people who have not previously been receiving assistance through MSD to access support. Support for people who are over the MSD threshold but are suffering in a lockdown period.

We need ongoing resourcing to continue the much needed support to whānau. Set up a robust network in the Valley.





A local who is cognitively impaired and without any form of contact during the previous lockdown. He benefited from the phone installation which was a direct result from feedback received on his situation in 2020, and which ultimately enabled a change of address to a more supportive environment for his complex needs. Hence, I think the need to have a cross-agency body sitting around the table with us, it is complex, there are complex food needs. The support networks that fell away would know of those issues, but it isn't always passed on.

Some had already received food parcels from a local provider but wanted more food or specific items such as meat, bread, veges. Some had a shopping list. It would be good to have a standardised food parcel to prevent 'shopping around'.

Last year we put our response down really quickly and went back to business as usual, this time we haven't and that is a big difference. I think it is very frightening for families and just as our agencies are realising that we need to do things differently, our community is also realising that too.

Work with the strengths in our communities already and the relationships that already exist, our foodbanks, and support them to have a different conversation with their communities that has a focus on resilience.

We need to have a really long hard look at how food rescue interacts with foodbanks and our conversations around food equity. Why is it that the poorest communities are living on the scraps from the table rather than us all eating from the same table?

There is a different solution that needs to emerge around accessing fruit and veg locally.

Now there's a possibility for on-going support of each other. Bulk purchasing is a great outcome of the Kai Collective.





There is so much regulation and it is so controlled that there needs to be shifts in legislation that makes it easy for food co-ops to flourish. This sits with MPI, MSD but also our climate change response. If we start bringing all those agencies together and they all have to work together... the Ministry of Health should be in here too.






Some kind of 'mechanism' for making it easier for businesses and people to know where they can share surplus food/goods in an emergency situation – a central sharing hub e.g. this would have worked well for the thousands of school lunches that needed to be distributed quickly. I'm still thinking that there might have been some duplication in parcels provided to people. How do we ensure some people are not missing out?

Address poverty. Councils have policies for housing and homelessness – how about a policy for poverty which underlies homelessness and lack of good kai.



FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

After two Lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, there has been significant learnings and adaptations to better serve the needs of our community. However, there is still more to be done to meet the emergency needs of our people as well as the ongoing task of building food resilience. Below summarises recommendations and ideas for future action in which we all have a role to play.

-  A continuation of resources to address the long-tail of COVID-19 as well as the ongoing need to build food resilience.
-  Some degree of standardisation of food parcels to provide consistency among koha kai providers.
-  Utilise non-digital communication channels to disseminate information on accessing kai in the community, alongside support for those who lack access to digital platforms and/or lack digital literacy. This can include the provision of devices, internet connection and knowledge of how to navigate online platforms.
-  Provision of quality food, especially fruit and vegetables as part of koha kai.
-  Utilise the power of the Hutt Valley Emergency Kai Collective to bulk-buy food staples and healthy food.

- ▶ Strengthen the relationship between koha kai distributors and local Council hubs to access support for transport, heavy lifting, distributing kai, administration and technology support.
- ▶ Identify and access larger community facilities for the distribution of kai which allows for social distancing.
- ▶ Continue to engage with agencies like MSD, Kaibosh and the New Zealand Food Network regarding a regional and local model for accessing and distributing appropriate kai.
- ▶ Enhance communication with businesses and the community about how and where to contribute food and goods for the community.
- ▶ Explore how the 'Ka Ora Ka Ako - healthy school lunches programme' could link with koha kai providers during any future Lockdowns and the school holidays.
- ▶ Explore how koha kai distributors can be better supported, linked and resourced to respond to whānau with complex health and social needs. This includes enhanced cross-agency communication and collaboration.
- ▶ Continue conversations with our communities about their experience of Lockdown and their current situation.
- ▶ Address resilience and wellbeing alongside meeting our community's kai needs.
- ▶ Develop a Te Awa Kairangi plan that addresses food security and food resilience - and the journey from one to the other.



If you would like to find out more about Healthy Families Hutt Valley or Hutt City Council and our work alongside local leaders and communities get in touch with us on 04 570 6666. You can find out more about the Hutt Valley Emergency Kai Collective, on their Facebook page 'Hutt Valley Emergency Kai Collective'.



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