



All children thriving, belonging and achieving – what will it take?

A COMMUNITY/NGO BRIEFING PAPER

JULY 2012

The definition of a child in the context of this paper is from birth up to 18 years.

INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS BRIEFING PAPER?

The number of submissions to the 2011 "Green Paper for Vulnerable Children" shows the importance of child wellbeing to New Zealanders. Submissions reflected deep concern about the limited action over recent decades to improve the situation for children. The submissions are testament to the level of individual and organisational commitment to progress child and family wellbeing. And there are striking synergies amongst submissions. They call for:

- an Action Plan for all children
- priority to be given to investing in children and their wellbeing
- increased emphasis on proactively looking for ways to support families and communities in their role of nurturing children
- work to eliminate violence in families and communities and address inequities, especially child poverty.

The most common theme in submissions is that the best way to do better for vulnerable children is to do better for all children.

This briefing paper has been developed to present a unified position statement¹, based on the common themes from submissions², on what it will take for every child to thrive, belong and achieve. The intention in presenting this common viewpoint is to encourage decision-making that is in the best interests of children. No child should be disadvantaged as a result of any practice, policy or legislative changes arising from the Green Paper and, in fact, many more children should be a lot better off.

WHAT ARE THE COMMON THEMES?

There is wide support for the Green Paper's vision that "every child in New Zealand thrives, belongs and achieves."

It is important to New Zealanders that, as a society, we care for our children well. Changes must:

- be proactive, strengths-based, respectful and supportive of the inherent dignity of the child
- give effect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC)
- aim to improve the wellbeing of all children
- aim to prevent maltreatment as well as responding effectively to abuse and neglect
- prioritise investment in children.

All children, whatever their circumstances or experience, are vulnerable. Children's wellbeing, for better or worse, depends largely on circumstances which are beyond their control and which can change at any time. The narrow definition of vulnerability implied in the questions asked in each of the Green Paper's sections limits effective provision of services to enhance children's wellbeing and minimise their vulnerability. A far wider view needs to be taken for the Green Paper's vision to be achieved. Categorising some children as vulnerable can undermine their sense of belonging and fail to recognise or strengthen their resilience. It also risks missing out children who need assistance because they are not categorised as vulnerable.

"The Green Paper treats this term (vulnerable) as a 'catch-all' word without clearly defining it. All children, by virtue of the fact that they are children, are vulnerable. Some children have additional 'vulnerabilities' thrust upon them at different stages in their lives and in different circumstances."

155 Community House
Whangarei submission

Child abuse is the predominant concern of the Green Paper but neglect is a common, harmful experience for many children that is not a focus in the Green Paper.

The factors that lie behind child abuse are much the same as those that lie behind other poor outcomes for children. Child abuse can be most effectively reduced through policies that benefit all children. What needs to be well considered is how best to address factors that contribute to good outcomes for children, including those which address parents' stress, initiatives to promote positive parenting, and a range of interventions relevant to the common and diverse needs of all children.

While reviews of services and policies are needed, they must be carried out with due care, and not in isolation

¹ More detailed information is available in the supplementary paper, "What will it take?" <http://www.unicef.org.nz/greenpaper>

² This Briefing Paper is based on common themes from over 90 submissions. The individuals and organisations that endorse the briefing paper are listed on page 4. They represent a wide variety of agencies and individuals, including, but not limited to, those whose day to day work is with or for children.

from one another or from the wider context of the needs, interests and rights of children, families and whanau. Government responsibility toward New Zealand's children cannot be met by service provision alone.

More detail and specific information about potential policies is required for meaningful input into the next stage of the process to achieve the Green Paper's vision.

"Don't think about it as 'fixing the kid', without looking at the broader problems behind what's going on. Look at the whole picture and the way support is applied."

Refugee background youth quoted in ChangeMakers Refugee Forum submission

"We submit that enabling all New Zealand children to Thrive, to Belong and to Achieve requires a shift in our national cultural attitudes to children, and so to family. It requires acceptance of the individual responsibility for our own children, the responsibility of parenthood – and of responsibility for other children – community awareness, community support and creating equal opportunities for adults of all backgrounds."

Submission from Analytica

An Action Plan for all children should be developed and implemented in partnership with iwi/Māori.

The following principles should underpin the Action Plan:

- incorporate the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in its content, development and implementation
- give full effect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- be developed and implemented using a participatory and inclusive process that facilitates local community involvement and ownership
- involve children as active participants in its development and in the strategies to implement its goals
- build on and scaffold child, family and community strengths and resilience
- recognise, and strive to respond to, the diversity of children's needs
- address all aspects of children's wellbeing, including emotional development through secure attachments, health, education and child protection
- address the issues that are known to contribute to poor outcomes for children, including economic and social inequities, especially child poverty
- include clear strategies for implementation and monitoring.

Sustaining the Plan beyond the election cycle is essential. Both cross party and cross sector support, and bedding the Plan in legislation, would help this. A whole of government approach is needed, with strategies for implementing the Plan incorporated into state sector goals and chief executive accountabilities. First, a political choice to commit to prioritising children and their wellbeing is required.

"As a Children's Action Plan is developed we don't accept a tinkering around the edges approach... we need to be bold and seek a vision of children as citizens in New Zealand – in their families, in their schools, in social and recreational activity and in public life. It is a vision of children who as citizens have their opinions and interests given weight in public life in a way that does not happen now."

Submission from Presbyterian Support Family Works

1 SHARING RESPONSIBILITIES – WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

Children will thrive, belong and achieve when they live in a society that values them and supports parents in their critical role of nurturing and protecting their family. This means that:

- Government has responsibility to ensure that their policies are child-centred and whanau/family friendly, do not inadvertently penalise parents and children, and that all families have an income adequate to meet their needs, with easy access to the resources and support that they need.
- Families can meet their prime responsibility for the wellbeing of their children when they are supported by services and other initiatives that provide information and support, and meet their children's basic health, protection and education needs.
- Communities have a vital underpinning responsibility, because a child and family friendly local environment enhances the wellbeing of children and families. Communities can be supported to find their own solutions to challenges.
- Local government has major day-to-day responsibilities for community wellbeing, including creating places and environments that enable children to thrive, achieve and belong.

It is recommended that:

- 1 Government acknowledges and meets its fundamental responsibility by shaping, maintaining and promoting a child and family friendly society.**
- 2 Parents are fully supported to meet their responsibilities by having access to a wide range of free or affordable support services.**
- 3 Community-led initiatives are encouraged and enabled.**
- 4 Local government is recognized as having a critical social role in local communities.**

2 SHOWING LEADERSHIP – WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

Effective leadership requires policy and legislation that values and respects children, and ensures that they are well provided for, protected from harm and able to participate in their family, community and social life.

Developing an Action Plan for all children, not just those regarded as vulnerable, would demonstrate leadership by symbolising the value we attach to children and setting expectations of what childhood should be like for children in New Zealand. It would provide an overarching, coherent strategy for policy and practice affecting children across the whole of government, and help to align efforts to ensure every child thrives, belongs and achieves.

It is recommended that:

5 An Action Plan for all children in New Zealand be developed and implemented.

6 The Action Plan for all children:

a. address all aspects of children's well-being

b. apply across all government agencies and parties

c. be underpinned by legislation for implementation, accountability and sustainability.

3 CHILD-CENTRED POLICY – WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

Policy will be child centred when the safety, wellbeing and rights of all children is the central consideration in policy development. Some of the directions identified in the Green Paper have the potential to improve outcomes for children, but some must be carefully assessed to ensure that change does not mean that some children miss out on what they need, or that local knowledge, trust and relationships are lost.

Some of the policies identified in the Green Paper warrant further development, as they offer potential to advance the best interests of children. These policies include:

- (a) the use of evaluation to assess the effectiveness of services
- (b) a greater focus on intervention early in the life of a problem and in children's early years (but not at the expense of cuts in services for other children, or of services for young people)
- (c) a law change to enhance information sharing (along with protocols and education)
- (d) improved processes for monitoring children and families (with an equal focus on building supportive, trusting relationships between families and those best able to help and support them).

Mandatory reporting is not a quick fix, and if implemented, will require extensive education and support for those affected. A legal requisite alone may do more harm than good.

Some of the policies signaled in the Green Paper are strongly opposed in submissions, because of their potential to undermine the wellbeing of children. These policies include:

- (a) eroding universal base services in order to increase targeting, rather than using a system of progressive or proportionate universalism.
- (b) prioritising some children to receive services, at the cost of other children who will fall between the cracks.

More investment in children is needed, not just shifting scarce resources around. Child centred policy would see new investment coming from areas of government spending outside the current allocation for children, and/or new revenue gathering.

"Good quality research is needed, but it must be based on a wider definition of what constitutes 'evidence', including multiple method research programmes that include qualitative approaches and formative evaluation. These are more appropriate to assessing complex communities and the value of community initiatives. What is essential is that high quality research looking at long-term outcomes and addressing the importance of context be appropriately funded, rather than relying on hasty and short-term low level research."

Submission from Professor Anne Smith

It is recommended that:

7 Before implementing the potential policy changes identified in the Green Paper, far more careful evaluation of the impact of these changes be completed.

8 Government first identify and build on what is working well before any changes are implemented.

4 CHILD-CENTRED PRACTICE – WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

Child-centred practice requires all people who work with or for children

and families to be highly skilled in their specialties (such as teaching, nursing, specialist therapy, social / community, youth and whanau work, law, youth aid, policy development and implementation). They also need to:

- share common ethical and practice standards and protocols
- have manageable workloads and good working conditions
- receive ongoing support, supervision and professional development
- have their work appropriately valued.

The suggestion in the Green Paper that availability of services may need to be compromised so that more resources can be put into workforce development needs to be regarded with extreme caution. Children cannot wait for the services they need.

Services will be effective and well used when they:

- are easy to access, affordable and can be delivered in a timely manner when they are needed
- are inspired and supported by and connected to community led initiatives
- are delivered in culturally appropriate ways and settings
- have staff who are trusted, respectful and understand their role
- work in partnership with families and communities
- are strength based and empowering
- wrap around the family not the problem
- work collaboratively
- are adequately funded.

Some excellent examples incorporating these approaches exist in Aotearoa New Zealand. Mentors, use of lead workers and the development of community hubs can be positive initiatives that warrant further evaluation, support and development.

"Children in need of services – whatever they might be – need them now. It is not acceptable that children miss out on the basis of a vague future promise of 'effective assessment, better allocation of services and reduced waiting times'."

Submission from Child Poverty Action Group

It is recommended that:

- 9 Investment be made in joint workforce development, including the development of a common set of values, standards and protocols, but not at the expense of service delivery to children.**
- 10 Positive and effective approaches to service delivery and community building be shared and their use encouraged.**

THRIVING, BELONGING AND ACHIEVING: WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

In his introduction to the Green Paper, the Prime Minister invited New Zealanders to share their ideas on how we can do better for vulnerable children. A large number and wide variety of agencies and individuals responded.

The submissions demonstrate a strong desire to do better for all children in New Zealand. And there is a wealth of knowledge and ideas within the submissions as to what this will take.

It is now Government's job, through the laws and policies it creates, to ensure New Zealand becomes "a society where children can grow up happily fulfilling their potential." (Submission from Sisters of Mercy, Wiri)

That will take political will, genuine partnerships amongst government agencies, professionals, communities

and families, and the same steadfast commitment to children's wellbeing as is evident in submissions on the Green Paper.

"There is no cause which merits a higher priority than the protection and development of children, in whom the survival, stability and advancement of all nations – and indeed of human civilization – depends"

(Plan of Action from the World Summit for Children 1990)

UNICEF NZ acknowledges with thanks the organisations and individuals who shared their submissions. We deeply appreciate the wise insights and opinions contributed by a range of well-established, experienced and widely respected people throughout the country who work with and for children. We express our thanks also to members of the Advisory Group who commented on drafts for this Briefing Paper. It is endorsed by the following:

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ACYA
Allied Health Professionals Association
Analytica
Andrea Jamison
Prof. Anne Smith
Aotearoa NZ Association of Social Workers
Ara Taiohi
Auckland Regional Consumer Network
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Bishops' Action Foundation (BAF)
Brainwave Trust Aotearoa
Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand
Changemakers Refugee Forum
Charlotte Robertson
Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)
Christchurch Methodist Mission
COMET (City of Manukau Education Trust)
Coalition for the Safety of Women and Children
Community Waitakere
Council of Social Services in Christchurch
Council of Trade Unions (CTU)
Early Childhood Council
Ecpat Child Alert
Ephesus Society
Every Child Counts
Great Fathers Trust
Great Start Taita
IHC New Zealand

Inspiring Communities
John Pearce
JR McKenzie Trust
Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower Trust
Manaia PHO
Manukau Child Advocacy Group
Mental Health Foundation
National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ)
NZ Audiology Society (1)
NZ Audiology Society (2)
NZ Association of Occupational Therapists
NZ Council of Social Services
NZ College of Clinical Psychologists
NZ Council of Christian Social Services
New Zealand Educational Institute: NZEI Te Riu Roa
New Zealand Kindergartens Inc
Te Putahi Kura Puhou o Aotearoa
NZ Nurses Organisation
NZ Playcentre Federation
NZ Psychological Society
NZ Speech-Language Therapists Association
North Shore Community and Social Services
OMEP: World Organisation for Early Childhood Education
OMEP Auckland chapter
OMEP Otago chapter
Paediatric Society of NZ

Physiotherapy NZ
Platform Trust
Presbyterian Support NZ
Public Service Association (PSA)
Relationships Aotearoa
Rethinking Crime and Punishment/JustSpeak
RNZ Plunket Society
Salvation Army (New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga territory)
Save the Children New Zealand
Service and Foodworkers Union
Nga Ringa Toto
Shine
Sisters of Mercy Wiri
Social Development Partners
Southland Interagency Forum
Space NZ Trust
Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa/
NZ Childcare Association
TOAH-NEST Tauwi Caucus
University of Otago Children and Young People as Social Actors Research Cluster
UNICEF NZ
Victory Community Health Centre
Waves Trust
Youth Law

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