

Oranga Tamariki LTIB

December 2024



New Zealand Council Of
Christian Social Services

Tirohanga Whānui | Overview

The New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Oranga Tamariki Long-Term Insights Briefing. We support the kaupapa to consider how to improve the early identification of, and support for, children and young people at risk of maltreatment between now and 2040. NZCCSS supports a focus on long-term, cross-party commitments and community-led approaches to the prevention of harm and provision of early support.

Our response to the survey questions are as follows:

a. Is this a suitable topic to be explored in the LTIB? Why or why not?

The extent to which this question is considered suitable is influenced by the current funding landscape which has seen a decline in investment in prevention and early support from Oranga Tamariki. While this question is worth exploring, there is a lack of confidence in Oranga Tamariki's ability to respond to the findings of the LTIB in its present context.

We are also concerned that attention be balanced across both aspects of the LTIB topic. If greater emphasis is placed on one component (identification or support) we recommend the focus be on how early support can be improved. This may mitigate the risk of increased investment in data analytics and identification of at-risk families without adequate mechanisms for responding to the risk these tools might identify.

Alternative questions that would be worth considering include:

- Exploration of the impact of one or more risk factors, such as unemployment, child poverty or mental health, on risk of maltreatment. We query how this might fit with work being carried out under existing strategies (such as the Mental Health Strategy) and how this might influence the ability for Oranga Tamariki to respond to findings of the LTIB in future.
- How to progress the Crown-Māori Partnership to better support whānau wellbeing. The future is uncertain, but we can be confident that Māori will continue to have a strong interest in the wellbeing of tamariki and predictions suggest that the proportion of children across the population who are Māori will increase (Smale, 2023). For decades Māori have been challenging the Crown to do better, but it is not obvious that the Crown has achieved significant progress. The insights briefing could build on the work to date to layout practical options, opportunities and pathways forward.

b. What opportunities does early risk identification provide for effective responses?

Early risk identification enables opportunities to engage in early support, increasing the likelihood of improved outcomes for tamariki and their whānau and reduced costs to society. Delayed support can increase the potential for harm, complexity of need, and costs of response. These combined factors result in poorer outcomes across a range of domains.

We refer to the findings of Mana Mokopuna’s recent consultation with children and young people which highlights the need for early support to ensure families are loving, safe and supportive:

“Mokopuna emphasised the need for more accessible support and services for struggling families as early as possible, including help to develop parenting skills, and more support with finances, mental health issues, violence, and addiction.” (Mana Mokopuna, 2024)

As demonstrated in children’s views above, and established in the consultation document, there are various factors that place a child more at risk of maltreatment. Identification of risk in one domain may lead to earlier identification of additional opportunities to support children and their families. Our members are concerned by the increasing complexity of need they are seeing in their communities and diminishing avenues for support resulting from cuts in funding for preventative and early support services. Whilst this briefing has a long-term focus, there is an urgency to addressing current challenges that prevent effective response to risk in our communities.

c. What barriers exist now and in the future that may affect early risk identification and effective responses?

- Accessibility of support
- Sustainability of funding for service delivery
- Visibility of need
- Education on child development and children’s rights

d. To what extent should different groups in society have responsibility for identifying and supporting children and young people at risk of maltreatment?

We are concerned about the longer-term impacts of fluctuations in Oranga Tamariki’s responsiveness where risk is identified. This includes damaged public trust and confidence in the system and the influence a lack of responsiveness may have on reporting behaviour among the public and those working alongside children and young people.

“Participants note a rising threshold and changes to the criteria for report acceptance by Oranga Tamariki (the statutory agency) in recent years, due to changing policy aims, abuse definitions, an ‘add value’ principle, and workload pressures. This heuristic change results in many reports not accepted or acted on, leading to frustration, anxiety, and ethical ambivalence for NGO workers.” (Keddell et al., 2024, p.1).

Greater consensus on response to risk and thresholds for statutory engagement are needed to increase effectiveness of the system across all parties who play a role in identifying risk.

e. What concerns, if any, do you have about early identification of, and support for, children and young people at risk of maltreatment in the future?

Vulnerabilities relating to the current social investment approach

As stated above, we are concerned that the current focus on social investment may result in greater investment in the shorter-term data-driven risk identification initiatives without adequate investment in responses to this risk. Over time this approach to risk-identification may be eroded with a change in government, meaning that we have invested significantly in data and algorithms without any lasting change in the delivery of support.

Risk of stigmatisation

Risk identification approaches that are heavily data-driven may lead to greater surveillance and stigmatisation of families who are experiencing one or more of the risk factors identified. Certain populations, such as Māori and Pacific communities, are more likely to experience this stigmatisation due to being disproportionately affected by socioeconomic risk factors and intergenerational trauma. It is crucial that risk identification approaches do not exacerbate existing inequities.

- f. Which future trends and drivers are most or least likely to have an impact on how we can improve the early identification of, and support for, children and young people at risk of maltreatment between now and 2040?**

Cross-party agreement on preventative policies

We are concerned that policy swings diminish our ability to invest in, and measure the impact of, early support for children, young people and their whānau. We see this currently in the refocusing of Oranga Tamariki to children in statutory care, with reduced investment in prevention and early support despite a preference within the Oranga Tamariki Act for a family preservation approach to care and protection, and provision for prevention and early support. We are concerned that this may lead to an increase of reports of concern, and children in statutory care, resulting from the loss of early supports for tamariki and their whānau.

This shift appears to be at odds with current narratives and strategies that prioritise the prevention of harm (Child & Youth Wellbeing Strategy, 2024) and the reemergence of a social investment approach which seeks to respond to trends resulting from “*a lack of focus on outcomes and prevention*” (NZ Government, 2024, pg. 3).

We refer to advice from Sir Peter Gluckman (Chief Science Advisor to the Prime Minister, 2009-2018) which positions early intervention as fundamental to a social investment approach, but reliant on long-term commitment from government:

“Social investment in New Zealand should take more account of the growing evidence that prevention and intervention strategies applied early in life are more effective in altering outcomes and reap more economic returns over the life course than do strategies applied later. This will require long-term commitment to appropriate policies and programmes.” (Office of the Prime Minister’s Science Advisory Committee, 2011, pg. 2)

We are encouraged by examples such as our legislation aimed at reducing child poverty which embed cross-party commitment in relation to one of the factors that compound child maltreatment. We query how this might be achieved in relation to other compounding factors identified in the LTIB consultation document.

Similarly in relation to another compounding factor, we are pleased to see the introduction of a mental health prevalence survey focused on children and young people. The availability of information across the long-term will be crucial for identifying need and gaining greater insight into risk factors and responses.

The extent to which we can achieve bipartisan agreement on approaches to early intervention and the prevention of harm, and commit to measuring the impact of such approaches, will greatly influence the effectiveness of any investment in preventing maltreatment.

Investment across the lifespan

Government typically focuses on investing in early years and youth populations to improve long-term outcomes for children and young people. We believe middle childhood (5-12 years) presents an opportunity to continue investing in children's wellbeing, building on efforts to respond to early risk factors in early childhood and setting children up well for adolescence and adulthood.

“Although the preschool years establish the base for future development, experiences in middle childhood can sustain, magnify, or reverse the advantages or disadvantages that children acquire in the preschool years. At the same time, middle childhood is a pathway to adolescence, setting trajectories that are not easily changed later.” (Huston & Ripke, 2006, p.2)

Te Kōrero mō ngā Tamariki (Wilson et al., 2024) provides greater insight into middle childhood in Aotearoa and where there are opportunities to support children during this age stage.

Investment in collaborative approaches to preventing harm

We support greater focus on collaborative approaches to risk identification and early support such as the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan and the Enabling Communities prototypes underway. Collaborative approaches should comprise cross-agency initiatives and government – community partnerships. We would like to see increased focus on identifying gaps in the ‘safety net’ and reducing siloes within government and community that impact on risk identification and accessibility of early support. This requires a focus across the wider children's system to establish greater visibility of children and their needs, and clarity and consistency of roles, responsibilities and resourcing of government responses to identified need. We would like to see a focus on enabling what is working well, which requires a commitment to identifying where there is reduced risk, or evaluation of initiatives that are diminishing risk for tamariki and whānau. We have not seen any evidence that the recent funding cuts (and resulting job cuts to the community social service workforce) were made with a clear understanding of the wider children's system within those communities. This should be a basic competency for government decision makers.

Effective integration of learnings into the children's system

Numerous reviews and reports have been produced identifying areas for improvement to the Oranga Tamariki system. What is lacking is a cohesive approach to integrating the recommendations of these reports. Comments such as those made below highlight the need for these recommendations to be given adequate attention and resulting changes to be sufficiently resourced and monitored:

“To my great regret, I cannot yet provide assurance that Oranga Tamariki is consistently operating in accordance with good administrative practice. Although it has, through many positive outcomes and the compassion of some of its social work, shown it is capable as an agency of supporting whānau, tamariki and rangatahi, it is often undone by underlying culture and practices which are not flexible or of good quality, which are not child-centric, and which are not culturally sound.” (The Ombudsman New Zealand, 2024, pg. 102)

“Three years of reporting has shown that the minimum standards set out in the NCS Regulations are not consistently being met. There has been some improvement in compliance, and we heard about pockets of good practice where agencies worked together to support tamariki and rangatahi. However, we are still hearing from tamariki, rangatahi,

whānau and professionals that there is more to be done and crucially, findings of abuse and neglect have increased.” (Aroturuki Tamariki | The Independent Children’s Monitor, 2024, pg. 10)

We call for a strengthening of the Oversight System, providing greater accountability and resourcing to enable adequate implementation of the recommendations made by monitoring agencies or via additional inquiries or reviews. We believe over the longer-term that this will help to increase trust and confidence in the Oranga Tamariki system and support risk identification and early support among the public and children’s workforce.

Likewise, the community sector has contributed to many consultations and provided much information to government agencies on what they are experiencing in service delivery and seeing in their wider communities. Gathering key themes from previous engagements is recommended to establish a picture of the aspirations of those working alongside children and their families.

Commitment to reducing inequities

A focus on preventing harm should consider and seek to reduce inequities experienced by populations of children. We are currently concerned that the repeal of section 7AA of the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 will result in a diminished focus on reducing disparities for tamariki Māori and a loss of accountability for ensuring these disparities are addressed. The repeal also has the potential to weaken the partnerships formed between iwi and government which seek to give effect to article two of te Tiriti o Waitangi, ensuring tino rangatiratanga over tamariki as taonga. As we look ahead to 2040 the responsibility under the Act to provide a practical commitment to te Tiriti o Waitangi should be foundational in enabling a strengthening of community-led approaches to risk identification and the provision of early support.

Increased cultural capability to respond to population trends

Ensuring we have the appropriate cultural capability to respond to changes in demographics among populations of children and young people will be an important consideration in efforts to reduce risk of maltreatment. Predictions suggest that the proportion of Māori and Pacific children will increase due to higher fertility rates, while the proportion of Asian children will increase through migration (Smale, 2023). These changes, in addition to those that will result from immigration and refugee policies, reflect the need for greater capability to ensure policies and practice are culturally safe and training pathways prepare a workforce for this diversity.

More broadly there is a need to plan for the workforce that will be needed to support children at risk of maltreatment and their families. This includes a focus on the types of compounding factors families may be experiencing that increase risk of maltreatment. A cross-agency approach is needed recognising the breadth of the children’s workforce. Current trends in teacher training, for example, would suggest that teachers are not being set up well to understand children’s development during specific developmental stages or identify or respond to issues of mental wellbeing that they may encounter among their student cohorts, despite playing an important role in early risk identification and connection to early support.

Giving greater effect to children’s rights in legislation

New Zealand’s commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) should guide and inform any strategy or initiative that seeks to reduce maltreatment. Currently there is little awareness of this framework and children’s rights among parents and caregivers, those

working alongside children and children themselves. Greater education across these audiences would raise understanding of children's rights, how they can be advanced and avenues for advocacy where rights are infringed upon. Incorporating UNCROC into domestic law, as recommended by the United Nations in its concluding observations in 2023, would support the enforceability of children's rights. Additionally, requiring use of the Child Impact Assessment Tool, or another consistent child impact assessment process across government would support greater visibility of children's rights and the extent to which we as a nation are performing in relation to these responsibilities. Ireland's proposed strategy in relation to UNCROC provides an example of actions that can be taken to review compliance with UNCROC and create environments where children's rights are central to government policy and processes (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Government of Ireland, 2022).

In relation to Article 12 of UNCROC, we expect that children and young people will be consulted and their views included as part of the LTIB process, and any government responses to this work in the future.

Tohutoro kua tohua | References

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Ko wai tātou | Who we are

NZCCSS has six foundation members; the Anglican Care Network, Baptist Churches of New Zealand, Catholic Social Services, Presbyterian Support and the Methodist and Salvation Army Churches.

Through this membership, NZCCSS represents over 230 organisations providing a range of social support services across Aotearoa. We believe in working to achieve a just and compassionate society for all, through our commitment to our faith and Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Further details on NZCCSS can be found on our website www.nzccss.org.nz.

Ingoa whakapā | Contact Name

Rachel Mackay
Melanie Wilson
Daniel Campbell