

# Community Waitakere Charitable Trust



Community Waitakere Charitable Trust (CW) is a not-for-profit (NFP) organisation committed to a vision of connected, resilient and sustainable communities in the West Auckland region. Community Waitakere works to achieve this vision by supporting, connecting and advocating for communities and organisations locally, regionally and nationally.

A key indicator of the strength and sustainability of a community is the health of the children within it, and all the indicators show that the wellbeing of children in New Zealand is declining.

Community Waitakere acknowledges and commends the work undertaken by the Government and by Minister Paula Bennett in producing The Green Paper for Vulnerable Children. The energy and commitment shown, alongside the engagement with community representatives has been heartening.

The organisation also acknowledges and supports the desire of Minister Bennett for a long term focus, which sits outside political terms and parties, in tackling the issues of abuse, neglect and welfare of children in New Zealand.

This submission from Community Waitakere is informed by the response of community organisations and stakeholders at a series of community workshops on the discussion document, co-facilitated by Community Waitakere, The Children’s Commission, WAVES, Lifewise, MSD and Auckland Council.

Community Waitakere submits the following points in respect of the Green Paper;

**That the focus of the report be amended from ‘Vulnerable Children’ to all children.**

The criteria which would inform the definition of ‘vulnerability’ have not clearly been defined within the discussion document. As the discussion document outlines, ‘vulnerability’ or ‘risk level’ of children is an outcome of many factors, and is both complex and changeable. Furthermore, vulnerability as an outcome of risk factors is variable according to individual circumstances – what may be of low impact to one child may inhibit the development of another.

To categorise specific sectors of the community as ‘vulnerable’ risks creating a lack of trust and hostile responses from family/whanau considered to be included within this definition. Promoting a negative ‘deficit-based’ approach that comes from a ‘problem-fixing’ basis reduces the ability to focus on a wider ‘community-development’ focus. As noted above, the factors that influence the wellbeing of children are complex and interrelated. Compartmentalising such complex issues into ‘problems’ can result in the strengths and assets within communities being overlooked.

Additionally, ascribing labels to only certain groups of children will inherently create inclusion/exclusion issues, where some children at risk may not fall within the definition of ‘vulnerable’ and thereby miss out on support. Targeting only vulnerable children will not meet obligations required by New Zealand under both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi.

Given this, Community Waitakere considers that **all** children are ‘vulnerable’ and require a fundamental level of support. While some children live in situations where a deeper level of support may be required, providing a minimum level of support for **all** children both reduces the potential ‘stigmatisation’ of providing support to just those identified as ‘vulnerable’ and demonstrates a more ‘child-centred’ approach by government.

**That the fundamental level of support provided for all children in New Zealand society to “thrive, belong and achieve” be maintained throughout the total dependent life stages.**

Specifically identifying ‘ages’ where ‘vulnerability’ is heightened, as per the discussion paper, could lead to fragmenting support allocation on an age-driven basis. Risks to children fluctuate at all life stages and as noted above, are dependent on a complex range of factors. Although adverse social behaviours, a reaction to factors that create environments where children are ‘vulnerable’, may be displayed to greater or lesser degrees at certain life stages, the conditions from which such factors originate are generally constant throughout the child’s life.

Developing a shared sense of responsibility for the health and well being of children is considered by our organisation to be an integral outcome to be sought by any action plan arising as a result of this discussion document. Only by building the strength and resilience of families, neighborhoods and

communities will such a sense of shared responsibility for the wellbeing of our most vulnerable citizens emerge.

### **Ensure that a child-centered focus is a foundation stone of New Zealand society.**

In order to increase the wellbeing of children, Community Waitakere supports the discussion paper's call to have a 'child-centered' approach to policy and decision making. In addition, raising children must be given higher status. This can only occur through a paradigm shift that places children at the heart of **all** decision making. Such a paradigm shift requires the application of both top down and bottom up leadership from which collaborative action is developed that engages and connects **all** sectors of society.

Community Waitakere emphasises that working with a 'one size fits all' template for action on child wellbeing is inherently flawed. Locality-based projects that are community-led and take into account the diverse spatial, cultural, economic and temporal factors existing within New Zealand communities, have greatest ability to influence and attain positive outcomes for children. To truly engage communities in behavioural change requires the government to recognise the whole community sector as an equal partner.

Cultural change will require leadership from not only the community and government but also businesses, media and educational institutions. Actions such as working with businesses to develop greater 'child-friendly' workplace and employment conditions will be required to demonstrate true commitment to a child-centred focus.

Community Waitakere identifies the Auckland Plan as displaying a commitment to a 'child-centered' approach. We commend the Mayor and Council for acknowledging that only through supporting family and whanau, communities can the vision for Auckland be achieved.

### **Recognise the complex nature of social issues that impact upon the wellbeing of children**

The complexities of the issues that impact upon the wellbeing of children in New Zealand require that a greater holistic lens be used in the approach to action plans. Unless social and economic issues such as child poverty, wealth inequality and unaffordable housing are addressed any action plan would have a limited effect. It is internationally recognised that social inequality is a predominant driver of social

behaviours. Any solutions to improve the wellbeing of New Zealand's children, therefore, need to address these issues. This will require innovative and creative ways of working across a broad spectrum of stakeholders and partners. Having the courage to take risks and acknowledge uncertainties is as important as the requirement for long-term, flexible and variable 'place-based' approaches and collaborations between central and local government, communities, business and educational institutions.

### **Support and resource communities and organisations to build resilient, interconnected and engaged communities**

Community Waitakere endorses the development of a 'village-raising' environment where residents and communities feel supported by agencies, businesses and government to work alongside parents in the raising of children. Fear of privacy legislation and personal safety are examples of barriers that may prevent people from addressing issues of violent and anti-social behaviours within their community. Building strong, connected communities where networks are highly visible and easily accessible by community members provides opportunities for concerns to be shared and communicated. Government's role in supporting such organisations within the community and working in **true** partnership alongside is vital.

Community developers that work alongside home-based community nurses is also an example of collaborative actions that could identify families that may be struggling or require an additional layer of support. Historically, Plunket nurses played an important role within communities, enabling a 'softly-softly approach' to a coordination of other services or support that families may require. Supporting and resourcing community networks to build strong neighbourhoods is an important role that government agencies can play.

Community Waitakere considers that greater 'on-the-ground' support systems for parents and whanau that proactively interact to reduce risk factors before they occur are an essential part of any action plan. Initiatives such as 'It's not OK' on family violence, White Ribbon Day, SKIP and Toddler Day Out are examples of initiatives that work to raise the importance of children and family within the community.

We recognise that the majority of parents want what is best for their children, but are often unable to deliver through lack of skills, knowledge or their own life stresses. If the government is really serious about tackling this issue then resourcing at a local level is imperative.

### **Information sharing**

Community Waitakere supports the concept of information sharing between professionals to ensure that they have the ability to create a 'full picture about children and their circumstances'. Given the recent child abuse cases covered in media, it is evident that lack of information sharing has contributed to delays in ensuring the safety of some children in abusive situations.

However, the big questions arise over how this information is to be managed, who will have access to it, who will hold the information and how will security and privacy issues be resolved? How will information affect the children considered 'vulnerable' at later stages in their life? What training or moderation will be provided to ensure that all case notes are objectively written, free from emotive influences?

Given the lack of clarity around the definition of 'vulnerable' children, Community Waitakere has concerns over the development of information sharing until this is resolved. Reliance on database information could result in an underestimation of the risk that a child may be exposed to. The question also arises as to the ability for the child to view the information held – who does the information belong to? And how would this be managed given the sensitive nature of many of the cases dealt with?

Any proposed information sharing policy would need to be applied to all children such that it normalizes information exchange across society.

Community Waitakere does not agree with the proposal to require mandatory reporting on suspected child abuse, and consider it to be a legislative-heavy, adversarial framework that may result in a greater number of families 'lost' to the system. Instead, we reiterate our belief that development of an environment that puts children at the centre of all policy and decision-making, developing the cultural concept of 'village-raising' of children and strong, connected communities, would bring about positive outcomes for children's health and wellbeing.

## Summary

In summary, Community Waitakere submits the following points in response to the Green Paper on Vulnerable Children:

- That the Green Paper is directed towards **all** New Zealand children as are any action plans that arise as a result of the submission process.
- That a long-term, holistic approach be taken to any action plan and policies arising from this discussion document. Such an approach should focus on developing partnerships across sectors and incorporate innovative and creative ideas on solutions to social and economic issues that impact on the wellbeing of New Zealand's children.
- That the sharing of information is encouraged but not until a thorough investigation is undertaken as to how this will work in practice, including addressing all issues in regard to privacy and that an appropriate consultative process is carried out prior to enactment.
- That mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse cases is not introduced, rather an environment that supports and provides ability for public to raise concerns without fear of personal safety and have these concerns addressed promptly in an appropriate and supportive manner.
- That a focus on shared responsibility for the wellbeing of New Zealand children at all levels of society be taken. This will require Government to support and resource community-led, place-based initiatives that recognise community members as equal partners.

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