



Every child  
**thrives, belongs,  
achieves**

Ka whai oranga, ka whai wāhi, ka whai taumata ia tamaiti

# Every child thrives, belongs, achieves

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## FRONTISPIECE

The Government wants all young New Zealanders to have the opportunities they need to succeed and reach their full potential.

That's why we produced this Green Paper for Vulnerable Children, and that's why we are firmly focused on improving the results of public services for all children.

The Government is working to build a future with better job prospects, greater life choices, and, in turn, a society with less dysfunction, unemployment, welfare dependence and crime.

We recognise that no matter what the Government does, it is ultimately families which raise children.

But I'm very concerned that in the past 10 years, despite hundreds of millions of dollars extra being invested across health, education, the benefit system, Child, Youth and Family and the justice system, public services have too often failed the children who need them most. Despite decades of good intentions from government, we're still failing too many of our kids.

Just throwing more money around will not improve the lives of these children. If it were that simple, then New Zealanders could expect significant improvements in outcomes for vulnerable children to have occurred in the past decade – but they haven't.

We will all need to work hard across a number of fronts and develop new, integrated solutions to improve outcomes for young people. I don't believe there are any quick fixes here.

This Green Paper is a chance for New Zealanders to share their ideas on how we can do better for vulnerable young people. I look forward to hearing your views.

Best wishes,

**Rt Hon John Key**  
Prime Minister



## MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

Welcome to the single most important debate this country can have. It's about New Zealand's most vulnerable children; about how we care for and protect them, the trade-offs and sacrifices we're prepared to make, and the opportunities we want them to have. It's about how we ensure every child thrives, belongs and achieves.

First of all, thank you for caring enough to get involved in this Green Paper. This is an opportunity for you to consider and debate the issues.

Some of the issues in this paper will make you feel uncomfortable. It is unquestionably controversial and that's why I'm asking you to get involved, debate these ideas and say what you want for our children.

I passionately believe this country wants more for our vulnerable children and let's be honest, we can do much better. But we have to change our focus so children always come first and remain at the centre of our thinking. That goes for families, individuals, professionals, communities, agencies and across Government.

Politicians all agree something must be done. But these are issues that deserve more than a quick news sound-bite and must be seen beyond three-year political terms. We must tackle complex, controversial issues and make decisions that will affect generations.

I can assure you the Government isn't afraid to challenge itself and openly debate these issues with New Zealanders to find solutions that will help our children and our children's children.

Personally, my *first* priority is the protection of vulnerable children. Every hour, two children in this country are physically, sexually or emotionally abused. It has to stop. We have to make a concerted effort to protect children from the lifetime of harm abuse can cause. Every child should be afforded the best opportunities this country has to offer and every child deserves to thrive, belong and achieve.

Get involved, be a part of this and tell us what you want for our children.

**Hon Paula Bennett**

Minister for Social Development and Employment





# Contents

|                                                                          |           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>CHAPTER 1: Introduction</b>                                           | <b>1</b>  |
| Government's vision                                                      | 2         |
| Why childhood matters                                                    | 3         |
| Vulnerable children in New Zealand                                       | 4         |
| Growing up in New Zealand today                                          | 7         |
| Who has a role?                                                          | 7         |
| Current Government priorities                                            | 8         |
| The Government's proposed actions                                        | 8         |
| <b>CHAPTER 2: Share responsibility</b>                                   | <b>9</b>  |
| Parents and caregivers                                                   | 9         |
| Communities                                                              | 11        |
| <b>CHAPTER 3: Show leadership</b>                                        | <b>13</b> |
| Vulnerable Children's Action Plan                                        | 13        |
| Legislation changes                                                      | 15        |
| Working with whānau, hapū, iwi and Māori leaders                         | 17        |
| <b>CHAPTER 4: Make child-centred policy changes</b>                      | <b>18</b> |
| Review Government spending to get better results for vulnerable children | 18        |
| Vulnerable child-first allocation policy                                 | 21        |
| Watching out for vulnerable children                                     | 23        |
| Information sharing                                                      | 24        |
| <b>CHAPTER 5: Make child-centred practice changes</b>                    | <b>26</b> |
| Improving the workforce for children                                     | 26        |
| Better connecting vulnerable children to services                        | 28        |
| Improving service delivery                                               | 30        |
| <b>Have your say</b>                                                     | <b>32</b> |
| Your responses                                                           | 32        |

# Green Paper for Vulnerable Children

A 'Green Paper' is a discussion document that outlines ideas a government wants to test with the public before making decisions. The New Zealand Government is concerned about the number of children who have childhoods that make it unlikely they will thrive, belong and achieve. The Green Paper outlines a number of ideas on how to improve leadership for vulnerable children, some policy changes, and some changes to how services are delivered.

## SHARE RESPONSIBILITY

### Parents and caregivers

The Government could review its spending on parents to make sure it makes the most difference at the right time, for parents and caregivers of vulnerable children.

- What services and programmes could government agencies consider in a review of support for parents and caregivers?
- Have government agencies got the balance right in supporting parents, caregivers and family and whānau to meet their responsibilities, while also protecting the needs of vulnerable children?
- When should government agencies step in and intervene with families and whānau?

### Communities

The Government will continue to support effective community-led initiatives, work in partnership with communities and remove barriers to communities finding their own solutions.

- How can the Government encourage communities to take more responsibility for the wellbeing of their children?
- What barriers need to be removed to allow communities to take responsibility for the wellbeing of their vulnerable children?
- What can you do in your community to support or initiate community-led actions to support vulnerable children and their families and whānau?

## SHOW LEADERSHIP

### Vulnerable Children's Action Plan

The Government could develop and implement a Vulnerable Children's Action Plan that includes common goals, targets and clear accountability.

- How can an action plan help improve outcomes for vulnerable children?
- What goals could the Government include in a plan?
- What actions could be included in a plan?
- What could be the priorities for vulnerable children for the early years, for primary-school-aged-children and adolescents?

### Legislation changes

The Government could make changes to legislation as a way to signal a long-term commitment to achieving results for vulnerable children, create accountability for delivering results, mandate cross-agency reporting, and make any necessary policy or practice changes.

- What do you see as the value of using legislation to underpin a Vulnerable Children's Action Plan?
- What other actions or principles would you like to see included in legislation?
- Who could legislation require to report on national progress against an Action Plan?
- What things could be included in such a report?

### Working with whānau, hapū, iwi and Māori leaders

The Government will continue to work in partnership with iwi, hapū and whānau to prevent tamariki becoming vulnerable and protect already vulnerable tamariki.

- How can the Government work in partnership with iwi, Māori organisations and their leaders to deliver services for vulnerable tamariki and their whānau?
- What services or programmes are working well to achieve tamariki ora?
- What could be improved to ensure that services generate tamariki ora?
- How can we get services to hard-to-reach Māori whānau?

## MAKE CHILD-CENTRED POLICY CHANGES

### Review Government spending to get better results for vulnerable children

The Government could review its spending on vulnerable children and move its investment into programmes and services that have a sound evidence base. It could also increasingly target its spending on vulnerable children.

- Do you think the Government should provide more targeted services for vulnerable children? If yes, from where should funding be taken to do so?
- Should the Government reprioritise spending to provide more early intervention; that is, more services for younger children and/or services for children that address problems as they are beginning to surface?
- If so, from where should funding be taken?

### Vulnerable child-first allocation policy

When allocating services, the Government could prioritise vulnerable children and those who care for them.

- What priority should the Government give to the families and whānau of those caring for vulnerable children when allocating services that impact on the children they are caring for?
- What services do you think should be included in this policy?
- When should adults who care for vulnerable children be prioritised for services over others?

### Watching out for vulnerable children

The Government wants more vulnerable children and their families and whānau to get the right kind of support sooner. It could make changes to monitor vulnerable children better and improve information-sharing practices.

- How much monitoring of vulnerable children should the Government allow?
- Who should monitor vulnerable children and under what circumstances?
- How can the possible negative consequences of increased monitoring be minimised?
- What other mechanisms could be used to keep track of vulnerable children and their families and whānau?
- What information should professionals be able, or required, to share about vulnerable children?
- Under what circumstances should they share information?
- Who should be able to share information, and with whom?
- What else can the Government do to make sure professionals and services have all the information they need to make the best decisions about services for vulnerable children and their families and whānau?

## MAKE CHILD-CENTRED PRACTICE CHANGES

### Improving the workforce for children

Highly skilled professionals delivering services in a co-ordinated way will provide better outcomes for vulnerable children. The Government could invest in its workforce for children.

- What can be done to improve or promote collaboration between professionals and services?
- What principles, competencies or quality standards should be included in the minimum standards for a workforce for children?
- Who should be included in a workforce for children?
- What other changes could be made to increase the effectiveness of those who work with vulnerable children?

### Better connecting vulnerable children to services

Some vulnerable children do not receive services that could make a difference for them. The Government could improve the responsiveness of services that the adults caring for vulnerable children and their families and whānau receive.

- How can the Government's frontline services better connect vulnerable children and their families and whānau with the services they need?
- What services could be included in this action to better connect vulnerable children to the services they need?
- What other changes do you think could be made to ensure vulnerable children are connected to the services from which they would benefit?

### Improving service delivery

The Government could improve how services are delivered so that they are more accessible, acceptable and culturally-appropriate to vulnerable children and their families and whānau.

- How could early education centres and schools be better used as sites for the delivery of a wider range of services?
- What services could be better connected and how?
- What other opportunities exist to deliver services more effectively for vulnerable children and their families and whānau?

# Introduction

## Key message

The Government's vision for children is that every child thrives, belongs, and achieves. Most New Zealand children live this vision with the support of their parents, and family and whānau. About 15 per cent of New Zealand children are at risk of not doing well. The Government is concerned about these children and they are the focus of this Green Paper.

This Green Paper has been written based on research, evidence and data. This is available from [www.childrensactionplan.govt.nz](http://www.childrensactionplan.govt.nz) arranged by chapter so you can easily see what was used.

A Green Paper is a discussion document that outlines ideas a Government wants to test with the public before making decisions.

The New Zealand Government is concerned about the number of children who have childhoods that make it unlikely that they will thrive, belong and achieve. When this happens, the long-term outcomes and costs to these children and to everyone is high.

The Government has worked hard to make improvements for vulnerable children. Some of these improvements will increase participation in early childhood education and strengthen Well Child and care and protection services. But Government is committed to making more changes. The Government has identified further improvements that could better protect children and prevent them becoming vulnerable.

There are no simple solutions and we are in an environment where government funding is constrained. The Government is inviting you to comment on how it can improve its policies and services, and how it can work better with others for the benefit of vulnerable children.

There is already a substantial investment by Government in children and their families and whānau across the economic, transport, health, and education sectors, and more. However, these issues are not the focus of this paper as other Government-led work is happening in this space.

Parents and caregivers have the initial and biggest impact on children and their childhoods. Parents and caregivers have an undeniable responsibility to do right by their children. Being a parent involves taking on life-changing and enduring responsibilities. Most parents accept this responsibility even if it means a struggle.

Families and whānau are crucial for children to thrive, belong and achieve. Throughout time, societies have recognised it takes a village to raise a child – friends, neighbours, hapū, iwi, community members and leaders are all critical.

Government is only one player. Many things impact on what happens to children that are beyond the reach of Government – in terms of what happens in the economy and job market and what happens in our homes. We all need to take responsibility for New Zealand's children.

## Government's vision

The Government's vision for children – everyone under 18 – in New Zealand is:

### Every Child Thrives, Belongs, Achieves

Ka whai oranga, ka whai wāhi, ka whai taumata ia tamaiti

| Thrive                                                                                                                                                                                             | Belong                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Achieve                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be healthy</li> <li>• Be protected from harm and keep themselves safe</li> <li>• Have their basic physical needs met (food, shelter, clothing)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be loved and supported by parents/caregivers, family and whānau and communities</li> <li>• Be confident in their identity, language and culture</li> <li>• Have positive connections with friends and adults</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Achieve strong foundations for lifelong learning</li> <li>• Have the support they need to contribute positively to their own and New Zealand's future</li> <li>• Children who are Māori succeed as Māori</li> <li>• Children achieve in their own culture</li> </ul> |

For children to thrive, belong and achieve, they need to be supported by caring parents, family and whānau, and networks. With the right environment, children will develop, learn and become increasingly independent. They will have their own aspirations and make an important contribution to our communities and our country.

But we also know too many children in New Zealand do not do well:

- Child, Youth and Family confirmed 21,000 cases of abuse and neglect in 2009/10
- Over 30,000 students are truant from schools on any given day
- 7,342 school leavers left with no qualification in 2009
- 13,315 hospital admissions in 2008/09 were for children under five that could have been avoided. In the same year, 1,286 admissions for all children were as a result of assault, neglect or maltreatment
- 47,374 children (aged 0–16) were present, or usually residing with the victim, at an incident of family violence reported to the Police in 2010.

Vulnerable children, like those represented in the statistics, are the focus of this Green Paper.

## THE TREATY OF WAITANGI

As New Zealand's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi creates a vehicle for nation building which continues to shape this country and its future. Principles contained in the three articles of the Treaty help us in framing the approach to support for our vulnerable children. These are partnership (article one), protection (article two) and participation (article three). Effective Government partnerships with iwi as Treaty partners, valuing children as "taonga", and ensuring that families and whānau can participate fully in society today, including in the modern economy, are critical features of planning for the future in New Zealand.

Children will thrive, belong and achieve – not in isolation – but as part of families and whānau, and communities. Children, particularly young children, are dependent on their parents and caregivers. This paper therefore takes a *child-centred* and *family and whānau-focussed* approach.

## Why childhood matters

The Government acknowledges the increasingly comprehensive body of knowledge that shows the importance of having a positive childhood, especially in the early years of life, and a warm and caring relationship with a parent or caregiver.

Research shows that pregnant women who are stressed and anxious are at increased risk of having babies who experience delays in growth and development, and may go on to have babies who have emotional and behavioural problems. Many of these impacts during pregnancy or the early years need not be permanent if appropriate support is given at the earliest possible stage.

The importance of early childhood is also well documented in research. Eighty per cent of a child's brain function develops in the first three years of life. In the period from birth to three years, both positive and adverse events will most impact on how children are "wired". This can impact on how they go on to function as adolescents and adults.

The links to poor adult outcomes are clear for those that do not have positive childhood experiences. Children in contact with Child, Youth and Family are five times more likely to have a Corrections' sentence by age 19 or 20 than a young person with no contact with Child, Youth and Family. Links between childhood experiences and adult mental health, substance abuse, poor education and employment outcomes have been well documented. The costs to the individual and society as a whole of not giving children the best start in life are high. Because we know that a good childhood is important we need to focus on those children who are vulnerable.

## INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS ON THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN

Internationally, the importance of children and their childhoods is recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC). UNCROC sets out basic rights for everyone under 18 and underpins this document.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also outlines special protections for children and young people with disabilities.

## Vulnerable children in New Zealand

Vulnerability is difficult to measure and describe because it often results from a combination of factors affecting an individual child and their environment (their genetics, parents, family and whānau, neighbourhood and access to services).

Evidence also shows us that children, and families and whānau, move in and out of vulnerability at different times and as crises occur. This has recently been evident with the impact on children and their families and whānau following the earthquakes in Christchurch.

Government does not have a comprehensive picture of vulnerable children. Information collected on children is generally by and within sectors (education, health, social development, justice), and specific to the services provided for them. However, New Zealand longitudinal studies give us insights into the complexities, risks and lives of some of New Zealand's vulnerable children. The research shows us that:

- There are specific factors that accumulate and can make a child more vulnerable and these factors can change as a child grows up
- There are two periods when children are especially vulnerable: when they are very young and when they enter adolescence
- At any point in time approximately 15 per cent of children (163,000) can be considered vulnerable.

We know from research that vulnerability is the result of an accumulation of factors. While individual factors don't necessarily cause a poor outcome, they can work together to increase the level of vulnerability of children. Two examples of individual factors that can contribute to vulnerability are growing up in poverty, and having a disability or a significant health problem.

Nearly 20 per cent of New Zealand children live in poverty. Research shows that poverty in itself does not determine life outcomes. Children growing up in households with not much money can have fulfilling and successful adult lives. But poverty in conjunction with other factors can further impact on children's futures.

Studies demonstrate that living in poverty during childhood can interfere with a child's cognitive and behavioural development and readiness to learn at school. Children living in poverty can lack access to services and opportunities. We know from the research that child poverty is a greater issue in specific locations, such as isolated rural communities. The statistics also reinforce that child poverty is a greater issue for many Māori, Pasifika and refugee communities.

Having a disability and/or significant health problems can be another specific risk factor. The increased stress, time and cost of caring for a child with a disability or a significant health problem can affect how a family and whānau function. Approximately 10 per cent of children (90,000) aged up to 15 years live with some sort of disability – learning difficulties, chronic health problems (such as cerebral palsy), psychological disabilities or other physical disabilities.

## Early years

Children are most vulnerable when they are young (under 5 years) because of their developing brain and their dependence on caring adults to provide their basic needs. During this period it is mostly factors associated with the parents that signal increased vulnerability of children. Key risk factors include:

- Parents with drug and alcohol issues (3.5 per cent of parents)
- Parents who experience mental health issues (20 per cent of parents)
- Poor parenting or caregiving that is abusive or chronically neglectful (4,047 adults prosecuted by Police for child abuse in 2010).

Research shows us that dysfunction and violence in the home and poor relationships around, and with, a child can cause long-term damage. One of the most significant outcomes of a child in distress is the early development of significant behavioural problems. New Zealand research shows that approximately 6,000 children have significant behavioural problems before they even attend school.

The real story of Tom (see box) shows the impact on a young boy of growing up in a home lacking in stability and love.

### A REAL STORY: TOM

Tom is a five-year-old boy who suffered severe neglect as a baby, often going hungry and receiving little in the way of love from his mother. On the outside Tom is a very active child, inquisitive and constantly on the go. However, resting and concentrating on a task for a period of time is really difficult for him. Tom's life with his mother has always been erratic because she has experienced mental health issues. He has lived with four different whānau caregivers and has only sporadic contact with his other siblings. The constant person in his life is his grandmother. A few months ago, Tom's mother disappeared. Police notified Child, Youth and Family of their concerns for Tom after they discovered his mother had died of a drug overdose. Tom's social worker supported Tom to stay with his grandmother.

Tom has a mild intellectual disability or possibly some developmental delays as a result of the lack of stimulation in his early years. Tom has already changed schools after his first term and now has a full-time teacher aide. He seems to be behind in his learning compared to his peer group. His teacher notes that Tom "is not in an emotional state to learn or interact with others".

## Young adolescence

Young adolescents (12–14 year olds) are another vulnerable group because early childhood problems can be made worse by missing out on opportunities, most noticeably as they transition into secondary school. Part of being an adolescent is taking risks. However, as a child grows up the factors of vulnerability also become more complicated and are increasingly seen through harmful risk-taking behaviours that can damage the developing brain. Key indicators of vulnerability in this age group include:

- Truancy (reported in 8–12 per cent of 13–14 year olds)
- Heavy and abusive cannabis use (reported in 10–15 per cent of 12–19 year olds)
- Mental health issues (seven per cent of female students and three per cent of male students reported to have attempted suicide)
- Criminal activity (8,000 Police apprehensions of 10–14 year olds in 2009/10)
- Binge drinking (reported in 34 per cent of 12–17 year olds)
- Early sexual activity and young pregnancies (4,552 births to teenagers in 2010).

The real story of Mary (see box) shows the ongoing struggle of an adolescent trying to cope with abuse.

### **A REAL STORY: MARY**

Mary is a 14 year old who lives with her mother, older sister and younger brother. Mary had been living with her father until recently when Child, Youth and Family were notified by Police that her father had been arrested for sexual assault of another teenager. Mary was moved to the care of her mother and disclosed that she too had been sexually abused by her father. It had also been revealed that Mary's father had put her on Depo-Provera contraception. Mary said she did not want to be on this any more and said she did not need it because she was no longer sexually active.

Mary's mother is worried about Mary's bouts of depression, cannabis use, binge drinking and occasional outbursts of anger. Mary's mother recently discovered that Mary had made superficial cuts on her wrist. Mary also tended to hide food under her bed and over-eat when she was stressed.

She usually enjoys school and appears to be in reasonable physical health, and enjoys sport and choir at school. However, Mary still struggles with some subjects and is known to skip school when it all becomes too much.

## Numbers of vulnerable children

While most children are vulnerable at some point of their lives, New Zealand researchers suggest that at any one time 15 per cent of children (or 163,000 children aged under 18 years) are particularly vulnerable. That is, without significant support and intervention, they will not thrive, belong or achieve. This figure is based on world-leading longitudinal studies that have followed children in Christchurch and Dunedin from birth to adulthood.

Within this 15 per cent are children who are significantly more vulnerable and at-risk of poor life outcomes such as learning and behavioural difficulties, mental and physical health problems, alcohol and drug dependency, criminal activity, imprisonment, poor education achievement and employability.

## Growing up in New Zealand today

New Zealand's vulnerable children are growing up in an increasingly complex world. Society is becoming increasingly culturally and ethnically diverse. A large sample of Auckland mothers who gave birth in 2009 and 2010 showed that nearly half identified with two or more ethnicities. Census 2006 figures showed that 24 per cent of children 0–17 were Māori, 12 per cent Pasifika and 10 per cent Asian. The proportion of children in New Zealand who are non-European is increasing. Children in New Zealand increasingly need to navigate a world of differing and sometimes competing cultures and expectations. The families that children are growing up in are also more fluid and dynamic than ever before.

Children are increasingly influenced by instant communication with their peers in a media, internet, and information-rich world. Young people also face puberty earlier than previous generations. Their wider social environment is characterised by a rapid pace of change, growing inequalities, global influences and diverse cultural norms.

There are things that protect children and allow them to be healthy, feel loved and resilient in the face of adversity. These factors are created by positive early childhood experiences, sometimes being connected to their culture, and through learning from challenges and mistakes. Resilience is further reinforced if children and their families and whānau are connected to their community to build additional support. This includes connections made formally through schools, churches and kōhanga reo, and informally through neighbourhood activities. This process emphasises building personal and community strengths. It supports and incorporates “bouncing back” and using prior experiences to help meet future challenges.

## Who has a role?

Parents, families and whānau play the most crucial role in raising children. Parents and caregivers have emotional and financial responsibilities to ensure their children receive what they need to thrive, belong and achieve. Most parents, families and whānau do a good job. Communities, iwi and hapū are also crucial to support parents, families and whānau to succeed. Families and whānau are least at risk of poor outcomes when they are connected and live in strong communities.

Local government, business, philanthropy and non-government organisations all have a role to protect vulnerable children and prevent more children becoming vulnerable. This is also true for social service providers and iwi who have an active role to play in protecting our children.

Government has a key role to play – demonstrating leadership, making policy decisions and delivering services to support vulnerable children. This includes delivering effective education and health services, and working with parents, families and whānau, and communities to make a difference for vulnerable children.

## Current Government priorities

The Government is committed to helping protect vulnerable children and prevent more from becoming vulnerable. Some of the actions it has put in place to make a difference have included:

- **Improving care and protection services** including work to bring training, screening and support for family and whānau carers in line with that of foster carers. Other work that the Government has done includes the “Never Ever Shake a Baby” campaign, investing in Child, Youth and Family social workers in hospitals, “Home for Life” strategy to give foster children permanent homes and supported homes for teen parents.
- **Improving access to early childhood education for vulnerable children** by supporting a range of community projects in high-priority areas including support for early childhood education providers to work more effectively with Māori and Pasifika families and families from lower socio-economic backgrounds, building new services, and encouraging home-based services. Over the next four years, it is expected that an additional 3,500 children will access quality early childhood education as a result of these projects.
- **Enhancing the extensive range of child health services** by improving the reach, follow up and quality of Well Child services to high need mothers, ongoing work to increase immunisation coverage, and preventing rheumatic fever through early identification and treatment of sore throats.

## The Government’s proposed actions

However, the Government could do more in four areas:

- Share responsibility – the Government alone cannot improve outcomes for vulnerable children: parents are crucial, as are family and whānau, and communities
- Show leadership – Ministers making a long-term commitment to improving outcomes for vulnerable children, and their families and whānau, and working with iwi and Māori leaders
- Make child-centred policy changes – making the targeting and funding trade-offs needed to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, and their families and whānau
- Make child-centred practice changes – excellent and committed professionals work tirelessly to serve vulnerable children, and their families and whānau, but there is room for improvement in how services are aligned and delivered.

Government can not be in people’s homes and protect children by itself. We need all New Zealanders to get involved. The actions proposed here will involve trade-offs, some tough decisions and all of us working together. Some of the actions are quite specific as Government has identified things that could be improved, while other actions invite you to suggest what the improvements could be in communities, families and whānau and government. Each action in this Green Paper is presented as things that ‘the Government could’ rather ‘the Government will’ because the Government has not yet made decisions on the actions. The Government wants to know what you think first.

# Share responsibility

## Key message

Children will thrive, belong, achieve when they are supported by parents, caregivers, family, whānau, hapū, iwi, community and the Government. We all have responsibility for our children.

Responsibility first lies with parents and caregivers. Communities also have an important role. Government alone cannot protect vulnerable children or prevent more children becoming vulnerable.

## Parents and caregivers

Children do best when parents, caregivers, and extended families and whānau, provide a safe and caring environment.

Research shows the importance of parenting and relationships between caregivers for ensuring optimal child development, especially the value of warm and responsive relationships, and the role of parents and caregivers in providing stimulating and secure environments.

But parenting can be a tough job. While all parents face challenges from time-to-time, most receive effective support from their families, whānau and friends. The majority of parents do a good job, most of the time.

However, some parents need extra support to succeed in their role. They may need extra support because they themselves are vulnerable as a result of a range of factors such as poor mental health, substance abuse or family violence. Twenty to thirty per cent of abused children will grow up to continue the cycle of violence and become abusers themselves. Some parents have children with challenging behaviours or disabilities and need additional skills to support them. We also know that many parents have disabilities.

Parents who need extra support are likely to benefit from evidence-based and culturally-appropriate initiatives of sufficient intensity that are known to be effective. They will also benefit from services that consider the needs of both mothers, fathers and other significant caregivers, such as grandparents, as well as address any barriers to being effective parents (such as mental health issues, substance abuse, or family violence).

When we think about parenting, we often think about mothers, but research confirms the importance of fathers. Fathers contribute to building self-esteem and resilience in their children, and influence educational achievement and reduced involvement in crime and substance abuse.

To support the important role parents play, the Government currently provides a range of parent-focussed support services and programmes.

The Government could review its current spending on parents to ensure that the appropriate intensity of parenting support is provided, that programmes and services are evidence-based and culturally-appropriate and include fathers and other significant caregivers, and that parenting support address barriers (including disability concerns for children and parents/caregivers with disabilities).

Support for parenting needs to be balanced with society's expectations of parental responsibilities.

When children are at significant risk of harm from serious abuse, there is an expectation that the Government should step in. However, it is not always clear-cut when the Government should intervene. Intervening early in a child's life when they are experiencing poor parenting can be the most effective action in protecting children from harm and long-term poor life outcomes. However, when the Government intervenes this can also take over the responsibilities of parents, families and whānau. Deciding when to intervene and what ongoing intervention should occur is a complex issue.

## What do you think?

- **What services and programmes could government agencies consider in a review of support for parents and caregivers?**
- **Have government agencies got the balance right in supporting parents, caregivers, family and whānau, to meet their responsibilities, while also protecting the needs of vulnerable children?**
- **When should government agencies step in and intervene with families and whānau?**

## Communities

Children do best when their community actively values and supports them, their family and whānau.

Communities can be where you live, people whom you relate to (such as youth, ethnicity, language, religion, refugee) and where you go (such as school, rural area, church, non-government organisations or online).

Communities have a role to play in stepping up to support children, their families and whānau, so they can succeed and look after themselves.

Research shows us that a strong community around a child, family or whānau plays a critical means of building resilience and supporting vulnerable families earlier. Some of our most vulnerable communities are well known, such as refugee and migrant groups, and some specific rural and urban neighbourhoods.

There are good examples of promising community initiatives where communities generate solutions to better connect and support vulnerable children, families, whānau, hapū and iwi to succeed. However, many communities still need more leadership, information and guidance to play their role in better supporting vulnerable children, and their families and whānau.

Stronger communities can also be achieved through local government providing strategic leadership to support communities coming up with solutions for their most vulnerable children, and their families and whānau. A recent example of this is the discussion document on the Auckland Plan.

### **AUCKLAND UNLEASHED: AUCKLAND PLAN – DISCUSSION DOCUMENT**

The discussion document sets out a vision for Auckland over the next 30 years. The discussion document recognises that realising the potential of all of Auckland's children and young people is fundamental to achieving that vision and therefore proposes that "putting children and young people first" is a priority for the Auckland Plan. The discussion document also recognises that this means supporting family and whānau, communities and older people in their roles as grandparents, carers and mentors.

Effective results for vulnerable children can also be fostered by partnership between local communities and central government to develop local solutions. A good example of this was seen in the uptake of the MeNZB™ vaccine to combat an epidemic of meningococcal disease that was highest in the most vulnerable and isolated communities.

### **MeNZB™ IMMUNISATION CAMPAIGN**

In the MeNZB™ immunisation campaign, local Pasifika, Māori, migrant and rural communities took ownership and developed local strategies to engage hard-to-reach families and whānau. The success of the MeNZB™ campaign was driven by community leadership, local professional leadership and the prioritisation of resources to the most vulnerable families and whānau in those communities. Both formal and informal community networks were engaged and worked together to attain high rates of MeNZB™ immunisation coverage in their communities.

Given the importance of communities, the Government could:

- Continue to support effective community-led initiatives that play a role in protecting vulnerable children
- Work strategically with communities and community leaders to improve outcomes for vulnerable children
- Work to remove barriers for communities finding their own solutions, such as high-trust contracts, and encourage community leadership in local decision-making.

### What do you think?

- **How can Government encourage communities to take more responsibility for the wellbeing of their children?**
- **What barriers need to be removed to allow communities to take responsibility for the wellbeing of their vulnerable children?**
- **What can you do in your community to support or initiate community-led actions to support vulnerable children, and their families and whānau?**

# Show leadership

## Key message

Leadership within Government and the wider community is crucial to ensure vulnerable children and their families and whānau are a priority. To achieve the best results for vulnerable children, New Zealand needs strong leadership, stability, accountability and long-term commitment.

Leadership is crucial to ensure vulnerable children, and their families and whānau, are a priority and remain so. There are no easy answers. A long-term commitment to making a difference is needed.

Government Ministers can ensure vulnerable children are a focus of their departments and work with other leaders (such as iwi, mayors, Pasifika church leaders, non-government organisations and business leaders) to achieve results for vulnerable children.

Three specific actions are presented that could demonstrate the long-term commitment of the Government to vulnerable children and their families and whānau. These are:

- A Vulnerable Children's Action Plan
- Legislation changes
- Working with whānau, hapū, iwi and Māori leaders.

## Vulnerable Children's Action Plan

Vulnerable children will have their needs best served when policies and practices across government sectors have common goals, are child-focussed and are well aligned with one another. This could be achieved through developing an action plan with a focus on vulnerable children.

Programmes and services for vulnerable children have traditionally been delivered by government departments and other agencies without necessarily being well co-ordinated across the sectors. There are pockets of integrated policies and practice across New Zealand but these often rely on the particular people involved. There is no national common goal or framework to unite child-focussed work.

Research shows that the current piecemeal approach within government and the wider community sector does not do well for vulnerable children. Children's needs don't fit neatly into silos. Children, and their families and whānau, get tired of telling the same story to different services.

Other countries have realised the importance of having a national action plan. The *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020* sets out high-level and supporting strategies to be delivered through a series of three-year action plans. It has indicators of change that can be used to monitor success. The framework is being used to drive improvements across all systems, as well as providing a mechanism for engaging the non-government sector and the broader community. The first report on the framework was published in 2010 and outlined national and state trends against 12 national priorities.

In 2008 the Scottish Government published the *Early Years Framework*, setting out a 10-year action plan for national, local and independent sector agencies to work together to deliver improved services for children. A detailed progress report against the short and medium-term outcomes was published in 2011.

The New Zealand Government could develop a long-term, cross-sector and evidence-based plan for vulnerable children across the stages of their development. This is sometimes called a life-course approach. The expectation is that the Plan would:

- Provide common goals and a shared framework that would unify policies across sectors and be founded in the cultural needs of the diverse range of vulnerable children
- Work in partnership with whānau, hapū and iwi to create and implement key actions for tangata whenua tamariki
- Take account of children's views and interests, acknowledging the diversity of children, their abilities, cultures and languages
- Work with families and communities at the local level
- Have clear accountabilities. This could include using the mechanisms available to ministers to set out responsibility for vulnerable children in the performance agreements of chief executives and their annual expectations of government agencies
- Set out monitoring requirements, including targets and dates
- Require Government Ministers to specifically comment on the impact of new or changed policies on vulnerable children and their families and whānau when they are considering policy changes
- Ensure ongoing research and evaluation to identify vulnerable children and ensure interventions are effective.

We are not starting from scratch. There are already a number of Government reviews and policies underway that focus on vulnerable children. These include:

- Work that focuses on improving opportunities for adolescents who are at risk of unemployment and poor educational outcomes
- The Government's work programme for welfare reform which will provide better support for beneficiaries with children to support them into work
- The Government's review of the child support system to better recognise the shared responsibility of caring for children
- The response to a recent early childhood education report with proposals to improve early childhood education access and delivery, particularly for vulnerable children, and their families and whānau
- The response to a recent report on reducing poor adolescent outcomes
- Introducing a common assessment framework across maternity and Well Child providers and joint training.

The chief executives of social sector government agencies already regularly meet and could provide a useful forum to ensure the alignment and delivery of the Plan.

## What do you think?

- **How can an action plan help improve outcomes for vulnerable children?**
- **What goals could the Government include in a plan?**
- **What actions could be included in a plan?**
- **What could be the priorities for vulnerable children for the early years, for primary school-aged children and adolescents?**

### Legislation changes

To achieve the best results for vulnerable children, New Zealand needs strong leadership, stability, accountability and long-term commitment. One way for the Government to do this is through legislation.

Getting the best results for vulnerable children is not a quick fix. It requires commitment to goals and targets, and changed ways of working over a number of years. It requires government agencies to work together. Because it *requires* change, legislation can be a circuit breaker to overcome barriers that are resistant to change.

Some countries have used legislation to underpin their commitment to actions for children. In England, the set of reforms known as “Every Child Matters” is underpinned by the *Children Act 2004*. Among other things, this legislation requires local authorities to work with other organisations in their area to determine and implement what works best for children and young people across education and social services. They also have discretion to add other functions, such as leisure or housing services.

The Australian state of Victoria uses the *Child Wellbeing and Safety Act 2005* to set out, among other things, the principles it believes in for the wellbeing of children and the services that are provided to them and their families. It puts a duty on a chief executive to work with Aboriginal communities and establish a Victorian Aboriginal Child Wellbeing Charter to improve outcomes for aboriginal children.

The New Zealand Government could make changes to legislation that would:

- Set out the requirements for a Vulnerable Children’s Action Plan
- Set out the purpose and goals of having such a Plan
- Create cross-agency accountability for implementing the Plan by, for example, allocating responsibility for it to a group of government chief executives
- Specifically recognise the needs of tangata whenua tamariki and include a process for a partnership with iwi, hapū and other Māori organisations to address those needs
- Mandate regular reporting on progress
- Make specific policy changes (such as requirements for sharing information about vulnerable children)
- Make changes to practice (such as any necessary workforce regulation).

The Plan itself might not be included in legislation because its actions and targets will need to change as progress is made or new evidence becomes available. The legislation could contain a requirement that a Plan be developed, and that this Plan would be publicly available at all times and would contain actions, targets and timelines. Legislation could also clearly determine what must be in the Plan to ensure a long-term commitment.

Everyone will be interested in knowing the difference the Plan is making for vulnerable children. Legislation can set out processes for accountability that are transparent. It can require monitoring and reporting of progress against the Plan so that, as a nation, we know how that progress is being made.

It could do this through existing Government reporting processes. In addition, it could require a report to be tabled in Parliament so that it could be examined, for example, at a Select Committee. Or legislation could mandate monitoring of national progress on the Plan by a crown agency such as the Children’s Commissioner.

## What do you think?

- **What do you see as the value of using legislation to underpin a Vulnerable Children’s Action Plan?**
- **What other actions or principles would you like to see included in legislation?**
- **Who could legislation require to report on national progress against an Action Plan?**
- **What things could be included in such a report?**

## Working with whānau, hapū, iwi and Māori leaders

Research shows that Māori tamariki are strengthened when they are connected to their identity, language and culture through whānau, hapū and iwi. There are powerful examples of Māori-led development, such as kōhanga reo and kura kaupapa that are based on Māori language and culture and allow Māori children to succeed as Māori. Evidence shows they work. Māori NCEA results are significantly better in kura kaupapa and Māori boarding schools than in mainstream schools.

Many Māori-designed, developed and delivered services are effective for vulnerable tamariki and whānau. These initiatives are being driven by leaders who are dedicated to ensuring that all Māori can live and succeed as Māori. National Māori organisations, such as the National Urban Māori Association, Māori Women's Welfare League and Te Korowai Aroha, have formed new organisations based on Māori knowledge.

The Government is committed to the important work of settling historical Treaty grievances by 2014. The settlement of these claims creates a platform for Māori development and growth. Whānau, hapū and iwi look to have greater stability as a result of the claims settlement process and this bodes well for tamariki ora – the wellbeing of children.

The Government will continue to work in partnership with iwi, hapū and whānau to prevent tamariki becoming vulnerable and protect vulnerable tamariki. Whole-of-government approaches have the potential to enable iwi, multi-iwi groupings or settlement entities to more effectively partner with government agencies and participate in policy development and the provision of services to better meet the local needs of iwi and their tamariki.

## What do you think?

- **How can the Government work in partnership with iwi, Māori organisations and their leaders to deliver services for vulnerable tamariki and their whānau?**
- **What services or programmes are working well to achieve tamariki ora?**
- **What could be improved to ensure that services generate tamariki ora?**
- **How can we get services to hard-to-reach Māori whānau?**

# Make child-centred policy changes

## Key message

Getting good services for vulnerable children may not need new money but a more effective targeting of money already in the system and a commitment to invest in programmes with a sound evidence base.

The Government's decisions about what is funded, how services are allocated, and what laws and regulations are in place, can make an important difference for vulnerable children, and their families and whānau.

The Government could make three sets of policy changes by:

- Reviewing Government spending to get better results for vulnerable children
- Adopting a "vulnerable child-first" allocation policy
- Setting up mechanisms to watch out for vulnerable children.

## Review Government spending to get better results for vulnerable children

To achieve value for money and more effective services requires working from an evidence base and targeting services.

### Working from an evidence base

Annual Government funding for vulnerable children includes direct spending, such as the services provided last year through Child, Youth and Family (\$443m), Vote Education spending on supporting students with special education needs (\$460m) and child and adolescent mental health services (\$138m). This funding is in addition to spending on universal services that benefit all children, such as schools and Well Child services, as well as spending that indirectly benefits children such as the provision of housing.

This reflects Government's desire to look after our most vulnerable children. But the evidence shows that we may not be getting the outcomes we could from the investment we are making. We may be spending on programmes and services that are not based on sound evidence or delivered effectively. When Government implements new policies, they need to be evaluated.

There may not be a need for more money to be spent on vulnerable children, but rather a willingness to make better use of the resourcing we already have.

Other countries are adopting a more rigorous approach to identifying which are the best programmes and services to invest in. In the United States, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy was established as an independent source of advice on evidence-based, cost-effective programmes and policies.

The Washington State Government has adopted many of its recommendations. In New Zealand the recent publication from the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor highlighted the need for more programmes and services to be based on credible evidence.

The New Zealand Government could review its spending on vulnerable children in order to invest over time in those programmes and services that work. It needs to be assured that all programmes and services (including government services) are effective, culturally-appropriate, implemented well and provide value for money.

There will need to be an ongoing process of research, evaluation and monitoring of programmes and services that informs investment decisions and allows us to move towards programmes and services that we can be confident will work well.

An evidence-based approach promotes the piloting and independent evaluation of those programmes and services that have been proven to be effective overseas for their suitability for New Zealand. There could also be independent evaluation of programmes and services that are home-grown and show promise.

New Zealand has a tradition of innovative programmes and services being started by iwi, individuals or small groups. There needs to be a process to evaluate good ideas and consider whether those ideas are suitable for investment.

But good ideas are just part of the picture. Better management of the delivery of programmes will also identify and allow us to correct programmes that are poorly delivered or have departed from their original successful format into something less effective.

Moving to a more rigorous evidence-based approach to resourcing decisions may mean:

- Some programmes or services that people like or passionately support are not funded or are scaled back
- Researching for the New Zealand context, taking into account the diversity of New Zealand society and including a kaupapa Māori approach
- Setting up robust funding and planning mechanisms. Robust research and evaluation will take time and needs to be carefully planned so that programmes and services are not dismissed because they are evaluated for outcomes when they are still in the establishment phase
- Providing fewer services to children at lower risk of poor outcomes.

### **Targeting services and programmes to vulnerable children**

Some services are delivered specifically for vulnerable children. Such services are called targeted, in that they are available to a limited number of children. Other universal services are available for all children. Universal services can protect vulnerable children by bringing them to the attention of professionals early and preventing them from becoming more vulnerable.

Targeting those in most need may bring the greatest gains for vulnerable children and for our society. But targeting accurately is hard to do, and can never guarantee to identify all those who are at risk. Our current mix of universal and targeted services has also grown incrementally over time, sometimes in an ad hoc fashion. Under present policies, programmes and services may not be targeted to provide the best assistance to those children who need it most during their early years, when the greatest gains can be made.

There may be a need to review whether we have got the balance right between universal services and more targeted services to achieve the best outcomes for vulnerable children. But in order to provide more targeted services for vulnerable children we may need to reprioritise spending and this could mean:

- Reducing spending for other children in order to spend more on those children in greatest need
- Transferring funding from other areas of government activity in order to spend more on vulnerable children.

## What do you think?

- **Do you think the Government should provide more targeted services for vulnerable children? If yes, from where should funding be taken to do so?**

### **Increasing spending on early intervention**

Evidence indicates that we should target our spending to the early years or as soon as problems become apparent.

**EARLY INTERVENTION** means tackling a problem when the first signs of a problem are obvious. Often this will be in the early years of a child's life. In other cases it means taking steps early in the life of the problem – older children can become at risk and need help early when that occurs. Early intervention is important because it can stop problems getting worse and can help to quickly return children to being able to achieve good life outcomes. It is also more cost effective to intervene early rather than at a later stage when problems have escalated.

This has been stressed by Sir Professor Peter Gluckman in his report "Improving the Transition: Reducing Social and Psychological Morbidity During Adolescence". In it he writes, "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 returns over the life course than do preventions and interventions (or punitive) strategies applied later".

Benefits of intervening early include higher educational achievement and increased employment opportunities; lower involvement in crime; reduced dependence on welfare and improved health. Research shows that the gains are greater for children with the greatest needs.

There is an imbalance in our current spending on the earlier years as opposed to later, more costly interventions. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has found that in many countries, including New Zealand, social spending on children is still comparatively low during early childhood, before rising to a peak in the early to mid teens.

We may need to review whether current services are delivered at the times in children's lives when they could make the most difference; that is, when children are young, and when problems are just beginning to surface.

To focus on early intervention means that we may need to reprioritise spending and this could mean:

- Reducing spending on vulnerable older age children in order to spend more on young vulnerable children
- Reduce spending on other services in order to spend more on services that intervene earlier or are preventative
- Transferring funding from other areas of government activities in order to spend more on vulnerable children.

## What do you think?

- **Should the Government reprioritise spending to provide more early intervention; that is, more services for younger children and/or services for children that address problems as they are beginning to surface?**
- **If so, from where should funding be taken?**

### Vulnerable child-first allocation policy

The needs of vulnerable children could be prioritised by the Government and its agencies when allocating government services for adults that have a direct or indirect effect on the children that they care for.

Such services can include housing and some health services such as alcohol and drug rehabilitation services. These are typically services where there are limited resources and adults may be on waiting lists. Some services use assessment tools that are too narrow to take the needs of vulnerable dependent children into account when determining their parent's or carer's priority for services.

#### **BASED ON A REAL FAMILY**

Following her mother's death, Sarah became increasingly depressed. Delays in getting her the right treatment meant her partner Max was under pressure to hold the family together. Max also became withdrawn and turned to alcohol. Their two boys, aged 3 and 4, were often seen by neighbours wandering the streets, screaming obscenities and throwing stones. A neighbour referred the boys to a local health non-government organisation. They found the boys malnourished and showing signs of development delays.

The Government could require its agencies and contracted agencies to give priority for services to families and whānau where children are at high risk of poor outcomes. It would not do away with needs-based assessments that determine eligibility for a service. But once an adult is in the queue for a service (e.g. a state house), families with vulnerable children can move to a higher priority. This would help ensure that vulnerable children have a better chance of doing well.

Determining what the thresholds for 'vulnerability' are, and which children are vulnerable, will be challenging. Once they are identified, their details would need to be known to potential providers. An adult's privacy could be compromised in order to ensure that the children in their care are not over looked.

A "vulnerable child-first" policy could result in adults caring for vulnerable children receiving services ahead of those who do not have vulnerable children. Some people may have to wait longer because those with vulnerable children are prioritised ahead of them.

## What do you think?

- **What priority should the Government give to the families and whānau of those caring for vulnerable children when allocating services that impact on the children they are caring for?**
- **What services do you think should be included in this policy?**
- **When should adults who care for vulnerable children be prioritised for services over others?**

## Watching out for vulnerable children

The Government wants more vulnerable children, and families and whānau to get the right kind of support sooner. In order to achieve this, the Government has identified two changes it could make to monitoring of vulnerable children and information sharing between professionals.

### **Monitoring to ensure children stay safe and healthy**

Outcomes for children are better and services are more effective if children and their families and whānau are supported earlier. However, it is difficult to accurately identify those children who will benefit most from interventions because children will move in and out of vulnerability and many factors build up to make a child vulnerable.

Mechanisms to regularly assess and monitor the needs of children, and their families and whānau, would allow professionals to provide them with the services they need to stay safe and healthy. However, some children and their families and whānau do not come into contact with agencies so other mechanisms will be needed to engage with them to assess their needs.

The Government could investigate mechanisms to monitor and keep better track of what is going on for vulnerable children and their families and whānau to ensure they receive the services they and their family and whānau need sooner.

While increased monitoring of vulnerable children is necessary to identify their needs earlier, it also comes with issues that require careful consideration. Increased monitoring may mean:

- A reduction in privacy for those children and families and whānau who are monitored
- Those who are monitored may be stigmatised or labelled if the monitoring is not done appropriately
- Unintentionally driving away some families and whānau from seeking services for themselves or their children
- Increased identification of unmet needs and therefore an increased obligation on services to ensure these needs are met.

No matter how much monitoring the Government does, there will still be some really hard-to-reach families and whānau who will be missed. Increased monitoring by the Government or professionals does not stop the need for other mechanisms and approaches to engage with families and whānau. Wider family, whānau and communities have an equally important role in helping to identify children's needs and supporting access to services and support. Community-based approaches can reduce the risk of labelling some children, families and whānau as vulnerable.

## What do you think?

- **How much monitoring of vulnerable children should the Government allow?**
- **Who should monitor vulnerable children and under what circumstances?**
- **How can the possible negative consequences of increased monitoring be minimised?**
- **What other mechanisms could be used to keep track of vulnerable children and their families and whānau?**

### Information sharing

Vulnerable children and their families and whānau will often receive services from many different providers, which will each hold some information about these children's lives. Professionals need to know who holds what information and be able to share information with one another to create a complete picture about a child and their circumstances.

Currently, information about a child and their family and whānau is only able to be legally shared between professionals without the consent of the child, family or whānau if very strict criteria are met. Professionals are not always sure if the criteria have been met to share information. Sometimes it only becomes clear that a child may be at risk of harm or has been harmed when information from these different sources is compared. Having a complete and readily available picture of a vulnerable child's life is essential for professionals to make the right decisions about how best to support them and to ensure services are targeted to those who will most benefit.

Some countries have decided that child abuse is such a serious problem they have made it mandatory for professionals who work with children and/or their families to report suspected cases of child abuse. Mandatory reporting by professionals can be enacted through professional or contractual obligations or via legislation. Regardless of whether reporting of child abuse is mandatory or voluntary, professionals need to be able to feel confident in their ability to share information with one another to establish how to best meet the needs of the family and whānau for support, while ensuring the protection of the child.

The Government could review the current provisions in legislation to ensure professionals at the frontline, such as teachers, social workers, GPs, nurses, psychologists, police officers and therapists are able to freely share information about children they work with for the purpose of accurately assessing the needs of the child, and their family and whānau.

Increased information sharing, however, may mean:

- Reduced privacy and the risk of labelling a child or family and whānau
- Some parents and caregivers may not take their children to professionals such as GPs who may report suspicions.

More information sharing can also overwhelm professionals with large volumes of information, which can make it more difficult to assess individuals and target services. For example, some countries that have introduced mandatory reporting by professionals for child abuse have seen large increases in reports of concern to child protection services, which has made it more difficult to target services to those who really need them.

## What do you think?

- **What information should professionals be able, or required, to share about vulnerable children?**
- **Under what circumstances should they share information?**
- **Who should be able to share information, and with whom?**
- **What else can the Government do to make sure professionals and services have all the information they need to make the best decisions about services for vulnerable children and their families and whānau?**

# Make child-centred practice changes

## Key message

The Government could improve how services are delivered so they are more accessible, appropriate and effective for vulnerable children, and their families and whānau.

Every day thousands of dedicated professionals work tirelessly with vulnerable children, and their families and whānau. However, there are opportunities to improve how services are delivered and their effectiveness. Three proposals are outlined here for feedback:

- Improving the workforce for children
- Better connecting vulnerable children to services
- Improving service delivery.

## Improving the workforce for children

Children and their families and whānau deserve to receive high-quality services. Evidence shows that services are more effective for children and their families and whānau, when they are well co-ordinated and delivered by highly skilled people.

Every day, thousands of professionals such as nurses, social workers and teachers work with children and their families and whānau within Government agencies and non-government organisations. But there are no agreed common outcomes or principles for working together in a co-ordinated way.

### Improving collaboration

Failures in communication and co-ordination between agencies are frequently cited in inquiry reports, research and policy documents as one of the main reasons for poor outcomes for vulnerable children. There are some great examples of professionals working well together but in most instances this is because of the tenacity of individuals rather than the way the system works.

We know a lot from research about what promotes co-ordination between services, including:

- Better understanding and respect for each profession's roles and responsibilities
- A common language, vision and goals
- Improved information sharing and communication
- Joint training opportunities.

### Minimum standards

There are also thousands of volunteers and unregistered people who work with children, and their families and whānau. In some instances this workforce receives training and support for their roles. However, this is not consistently offered and there are no minimum standards required for those who work with children, and their families and whānau. In other areas and countries, this has been addressed by introducing minimum standards, or mandatory registration and training for the workforce.

## **Workforce improvement through common principles, standards, assessment frameworks and training**

A number of initiatives have been set up and evaluated in New Zealand and internationally to improve the quality and co-ordination of services for children and their families and whānau. Those which have been shown to improve outcomes for children involve comprehensive plans to better support the workforce who work with children, including:

- Common principles and standards including cultural competencies and quality standards to guide those who work with children
- Joint workforce development and training
- Common assessment frameworks for assessing children's needs
- Protocols for information sharing, referrals and follow up
- Accreditation, audit and evaluation processes to monitor performance.

Experience shows that workforce improvement is not easy and takes time but that there are real benefits to outcomes for children and in efficiencies for services.

The Government could develop a "workforce for children" by adopting common tools and protocols to facilitate co-ordinated working arrangements and minimum standards and principles for professionals who work with children and their families and whānau.

Achieving a workforce for children will require more shared knowledge and collaboration while maintaining aspects of individual expertise. This will not be achieved quickly because it requires professionals to develop mutual trust and respect for one another's roles as well as changes within organisations.

There is a need to standardise common elements of the workforce for children nationally. However, better and more sustainable outcomes could be achieved by allowing local and cultural flexibility and innovation in how the workforce for children operates. Professionals who are able to develop relationships with their clients based on mutual trust and respect and who can confidently engage in a culturally appropriate way with Māori and Pasifika families are likely to achieve longer term engagement with children, and their families and whānau, and improved outcomes.

Establishing a workforce for children may initially require more time from professionals to adopt common standards and develop collaborative practices. This may mean services require more funding or have to decrease the number of children being seen while the workforce for children is established. However, there are efficiencies to be gained in the long term through workforce improvements, including more effective assessment, better allocation of services and reduced waiting times.

## What do you think?

- **What can be done to improve or promote collaboration between professionals and services?**
- **What principles, competencies or quality standards should be included in the minimum standards for a workforce for children?**
- **Who should be included in a workforce for children?**
- **What other changes could be made to increase the effectiveness of those who work with vulnerable children?**

### **Better connecting vulnerable children to services**

The Government wants all children to receive the services they, and their families and whānau, need to thrive, belong and achieve. However, some children and their families and whānau do not receive essential child services for a variety of reasons. For example, their parents may not know where or how to access services, there may be a lack of appropriate services available, they may not be able to access services, or they may not want to engage with these services.

Because these children are missing out on services, Government does not know a lot about them. From available national statistics we know that 2,498 children (about five per cent) entering school in 2010 had not participated in early childhood education and 15 per cent of children aged 0–4 years did not visit a GP in 2009 (for Māori tamariki the figure is closer to one-third).

However, there are opportunities that could be better used to connect children and their families and whānau to the services they need. For example, hard-to-reach families and whānau are likely to access a range of government services (such as Work and Income, Housing New Zealand or accident and emergency services). At the moment, these services do not always ask questions about the other services the family and whānau are accessing, including services for children. Even if services are aware that families and whānau are missing out on services, the mechanisms are not in place to ensure they are linked in to those services on a consistent basis.

There are some great examples of Government services that already reach out to vulnerable families and whānau. However, there is an opportunity for more services to do so. Government could investigate ways to improve the response of its frontline services in connecting vulnerable children to the services they need.

However, if this is not done well there may be unintended consequences. For example, increasing the questioning of family and whānau by government services may:

- Increase the waiting time for these services
- Seem intrusive
- Discourage more families and whānau from accessing these frontline services when they need them.

## What do you think?

- **How can the Government's frontline services better connect vulnerable children and their families and whānau with the services they need?**
- **What services could be included in this action to better connect vulnerable children to the services they need?**
- **What other changes do you think could be made to ensure vulnerable children are connected to the services from which they would benefit?**

## Improving service delivery

The Government wants services delivered to children, and their families and whānau, to be readily accessible, acceptable and appropriate.

A variety of agencies and organisations deliver services for children and their families and whānau, including government agencies, non-government organisations, iwi and community groups. However, not all families and whānau find these services readily accessible, acceptable or appropriate to their needs.

Concerns often cited by families and whānau, and professionals about the way in which services are delivered include:

- Having difficulty in obtaining information about the roles of different services
- Conflicting advice from different services
- Having to repeat their story to many different service providers
- Having needs that fall into gaps between the roles of different services
- Not having services that are delivered at times or locations that are convenient for families and whānau to access
- Lacking an understanding about differing cultural and faith perspectives
- Not being able to express themselves clearly or be understood if English is not a first language.

We know a lot from research about how services can be better delivered to improve their effectiveness for children and their families and whānau. Services can be made more accessible to children, and their families and whānau, by:

- Having flexibility in the timing of when the service is available
- Ensuring the programmes and services are culturally-appropriate
- Using a variety of methods to inform children and their families and whānau, about the services available and how to access them
- Having an appropriate nominated person, such as a lead professional, whānau member or community worker, that co-ordinates services around the child and their family and whānau
- Seeking feedback from children and their families and whānau, about how they could improve services with them
- Delivering a range of services in an integrated way out of a community site, such as a marae or Pasifika church.

The Government could improve the effectiveness of its service delivery to vulnerable children, and families and whānau, by:

- Increasing delivery of services in locations where children are, such as early childhood education centres and schools
- Building on current opportunities such as Whānau Ora and Integrated Family Health Centres, and Work and Income's Integrated Service Response, to bring services together with a focus on children, and their family and whānau
- Working in partnership with iwi, hapū and whānau to deliver services, for example on marae or community centres
- Evaluating services and programmes to ensure services are effective.

## What do you think?

- **How could early childhood education centres and schools be better used as sites for delivery of a wider range of services?**
- **What services could be better connected and how?**
- **What other opportunities exist to deliver services more effectively for vulnerable children, and their families and whānau?**

# Have your say

In this Green Paper for Vulnerable Children, the Government has outlined a series of actions that could help to better protect New Zealand's most vulnerable children and prevent others from becoming vulnerable.

The proposed actions involve difficult decisions and could result in potential changes to what is funded, who is prioritised, how professionals interact with each other, and how services are delivered.

The Government is seeking your views and welcomes your ideas and opinions.

## Your responses

Please provide your comments on The Green Paper for Vulnerable Children by 28 February 2012:

### **By email**

Please email your ideas to [yourresponse@childrensactionplan.govt.nz](mailto:yourresponse@childrensactionplan.govt.nz)

### **By post**

The Green Paper for Vulnerable Children  
PO Box 1556  
Wellington, 6012

### **Check out the Green Paper on Facebook**

### **In person**

Hui, fono and community meetings will be organised and widely advertised in your local paper and on [www.childrensactionplan.govt.nz](http://www.childrensactionplan.govt.nz).

