

Committee Secretariat
Social Services
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON

To whom it may concern,

Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu writes in response to the *Support for Children in Hardship Bill* from our unique perspective as the South Island Commissioning Agency for Whānau Ora.

Te Putahitanga o Te Waipounamu

Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu was launched in July 2014 as the Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency for the South Island. Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu is a limited partnership supported by the nine iwi of Te Waipounamu through a Shareholders Council known as Te Taumata. Te Taumata has appointed an independent governance board which is responsible for the investment strategy. The name, Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu, represents the convergence of the rivers of Te Waipounamu, bringing sustenance to the people, and reflecting the partnership's founding principle of whanaungatanga.

Commissioning in the context of Whānau Ora is the process of identifying the aspirations of whānau and investing in them whether they are new or existing initiatives. These whānau-centred initiatives are expected to best reflect progress towards Whānau Ora outcomes.

Whānau Ora is an inclusive approach to support whānau to work together as whānau rather than separately with individual members. The Taskforce on Whānau Centred Initiatives identified six goals that suggest that whānau outcomes will be met when whānau are:

- Self-managing;
- Living healthy lifestyles;
- Participating fully in society;
- Confidently participating in Te Ao Māori;
- Economically secure and successfully involved in wealth creation; and
- Cohesive, resilient and nurturing.

The Support for Children in Hardship Bill

The *Support for Children in Hardship Bill* is an omnibus bill which would increase work requirements for parents with dependent children who are on benefits, raise the level of assistance paid to low-income families for childcare, and increase the level of financial support to both beneficiary parents and working parents on low incomes. Through a Whānau Ora lens, there are clearly immediate and tangible gains to be made from increasing investment in those whānau whose quality of life is being adversely affected by levels of income deprivation. However, we are concerned about the contradictory policy signals sent by encouraging parents to enter or re-enter the workforce when their youngest child is only three years of age.

Reduction in Hardship

We note that children are more likely to be in material hardship relative to the rest of the population in New Zealand than in any European country. A recent study produced by the Ministry of Social Development found that 18% of New Zealand children lacked at least five out of 13 items of material wellbeing in 2008, compared

with only 11% of the whole population and 3% of the elderly aged 65-plus. New Zealand's ratio of child deprivation to the whole population average, with children suffering at 1.6 times the average, was higher than in any of twenty European countries for which the same data was available.

The thirteen measures of material wellbeing included:

- "having a meal with meat, fish or chicken every second day";
- "keeping the home adequately warm";
- "having two pairs of properly fitting shoes"; and
- "having one week's annual holiday away from home".

There is no denying then, that the measures to provide material support to assist children in beneficiary and lower-income working households must be supported to prevent families from enduring the on-going struggle to make ends meet. We are in favour of the increased financial support to reduce hardship levels amongst our whānau. In this sense, we support the measures to:

- Implement a \$25 a week after tax increase in benefit rates for families with children, the first increase outside of inflation adjustments since 1972.
- Provide more opportunities for childcare support to help low-income parents into work.
- Instigate an increase in Working for Families payments to low-income families not on a benefit.

Increased work obligations for sole parents on a benefit

We do not, however, support the increased requirements for parents on a benefit to be available for work and be subject to work test obligations once their youngest child turns three years of age, rather than five years of age as now.

All children need people, or at least one person, who believe in them, care for them, and want to support them as learners. We want to support whānau to appreciate the uniqueness of each child, and respect and respond to the child's feelings, needs and interests. We believe that investing in whānau is in itself investing in children: children who develop a sense of self knowledge – who understand their feelings, and appreciate their own strengths, talents and uniqueness. Whānau can help children to grow in confidence; to feel the sense of belonging to family, and to their culture.

Whānau Ora is predicated on the basis that a child's relationships and experiences during the early years greatly influence their development. We recognise that families and parents are critical for children's attainment; parental involvement in a children's learning having the greatest influence on the achievement of young people. We also appreciate that the earlier parents become involved in their children's literacy practices, the more profound the results and the longer-lasting the effects.

Parental attitudes and behaviour, especially parents' involvement in home learning activities, can be crucial to children's achievement and can overcome the influences of other factors.

We therefore present to the Select Committee the view that Whānau Ora encourages the state to embrace the family as a whole and include parents as partners in their children's education from the very beginning of their children's lives. Government should aim to raise parents' awareness of the difference they can make and offer constant encouragement and support for them in fulfilling their most vital role of being the child's first educator. Encouraging parents to abdicate that role to someone else, while they go out to the workforce when a child is still a toddler, incentivises the employment of the adult over the learning of the child or the wellbeing of the whānau.

It is not that we under-estimate the importance of employment towards lifting income and increasing the household standard of living. But we do not believe in the theory of 'one size fits all'. On one hand, Government is promoting the importance of having effective and meaningful partnerships with parents and families through the Whānau Ora approach. On the other, it is acting in ways which could serve to undermine the vital importance of whānau through encouraging parents to seek work while their youngest child is only three years of age.

In our first tranche of commissioning initiatives, Te Pūtahitanga has selected an Invercargill based health provider to launch an early intervention initiative for Southland whānau which firmly places the care of children within the context of whānau.

Investing in child development alongside the empowerment of mothers has been proven internationally as providing the best start in life. 1000-Days Trust has developed a programme which recognises the vital role of mothers in doing what it takes to ensure their babies thrive. Dr Vili Sotutu and Dr Kay McKensie are the pioneers of 1000-Days Trust, which was formally setup in 2013 when they were joined by Aimee Kaio. The entity has a firm belief that early intervention is the key to enabling mothers to make better choices for their babies and whānau.

Investments in Whānau Ora give priority to whānau – whānau come first, and their needs and aspirations must be recognised. We cannot see the universal value of prematurely removing the child from their home and out into early childhood care and education, or forcing parents to abdicate their parenting role to the care of others while they take up employment or work-seeking activities when their youngest child is three. While it will suit some families well and may be appropriate for some parents who are keen to resume or establish their career, it should not be the de facto position for all parents and all whānau.

We are therefore opposed to the amendments made to the Social Security Act 1964 and as outlined in Clause 4; clause 6 and 7 and Clause 8 of Part 1 of the Act.

We will not be seeking to make a further oral submission to the Select Committee.

Heoi ano



Norm Dewes

Chairperson, Te Putahitanga General Partner Limited