



MANAAKITIA A TĀTOU TAMARIKI  
Children's  
Commissioner

# Weaving Our Strengths

## working together for child wellbeing

Hosted by JR McKenzie Trust and The Office of the Children's Commissioner  
Curated by Inspiring Communities



**What is this all about?** On the 24<sup>th</sup> May 2018, the J R McKenzie Trust and the Office of the Children's Commissioner invited a range of stakeholders from the children's sector, government, philanthropic sector, service providers, community groups and those with lived experiences to a one-day hui in Wellington, on reducing child poverty and improving child wellbeing. The day was managed and curated by Inspiring Communities.

### The day aimed to:

- strengthen relationships and encourage people to work together to identify solutions and opportunities to overcome what causes and perpetuates child poverty
- create an environment to better understand a range of experiences and perspectives of child poverty and child wellbeing, and
- inform work on child poverty reduction and the development of the Child Wellbeing Strategy, and encourage participants to engage in the consultation.

**What happened?** After a welcome and whānaungatanga facilitated by Marcus Ahukata-Brown, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern facilitated a panel discussion with policy, practice and experience experts who discussed the obstacles and enablers to achieving child wellbeing. Presentations by the Minister for Children Tracey Martin; the Children's Commissioner Judge Andrew Becroft, the policy team from the Poverty and Wellbeing Units in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet; and Professor Jonathan Boston helped inform the kōrero throughout the day. The real magic happened when participants were given the space and time to work together in small groups to weave their strengths and knowledge and to come up with ideas and tangible actions to address child poverty and achieve child wellbeing.

**What did we hear?** The kōrero throughout the day was rich, wide-ranging and diverse. Some key themes emerged:

- 1) **EMPOWER AND RESOURCE COMMUNITIES.** There was a strong call for community organisations and community-led initiatives to be resourced so that they can support their members to be connected, resilient and caring. Initiatives that are embedded in communities and run by local people are better able to serve children and their whānau than 'one-size-fits-all' providers who don't have local relationships or ongoing commitments to community outcomes. Community 'champions' should be supported to continue their work.
- 2) **RELATIONSHIPS ARE EVERYTHING.** Relationships built on trust, empathy and respect are critical - between government and community, between community and whānau, and among members of whānau, hapū and iwi. There was a call to build in mechanisms that intentionally develop and sustain these relationships and for values-based thinking and action.
- 3) **NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US.** Strategies and services to assist people living in poverty need to be co-
- designed with people who have experienced poverty. Listening to lived experience is key. Other stakeholders who need to be involved in the design from the start include Māori, children and young people and community groups.
- 4) **CHILDREN HAVE A RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE AND NEED TO BE LOVED AND CARED FOR.** Children should be valued and their contributions recognised. They have a right to have a say in issues that affect them. Children want to be loved, cared for and heard.
- 5) **THE WELFARE SYSTEM IS BROKEN AND NEEDS TO BE FIXED.** The dispassionate risk management approach to welfare needs to change. The welfare system should be redesigned around the priorities of children and whānau. There was a clear call for a 'culture shift' in the way that WINZ engages with their 'clients'. Stop blaming poor people, stop blaming people who work at services like WINZ, and start changing the rules so they are fair and fit for purpose.

## 6) THE BASICS MATTER:

**PUTEA (MONEY) MATTERS.** Benefits need to be indexed to wages and people need to earn a living wage. How can loan sharks reach families but services can't? Some people called for a Universal Basic Income and others talked about the importance of universal services.

**FOOD MATTERS.** The cost of food is a real issue for families. Breakfast clubs and free lunches in schools were strongly supported.

**HOUSING MATTERS.** Homelessness and transience are growing issues. There is a need for warm, safe, dry, permanent, affordable homes and more social housing. There is an opportunity to redesign communities through urban planning.

**TRANSPORT MATTERS.** The cost of petrol and public transport emerged as an important issue. Having to travel between and 'chase' services is difficult and expensive.

**EDUCATION MATTERS.** We need to invest more in early childhood education and reform our education system so it is relevant and serving the needs of all children. There were calls for learning supports to be increased, and for unconscious bias training. Some suggested there needs to be more support for schools to be community hubs.

7) **VALUE AND SUPPORT PARENTS AND CARERS.** Removing stress factors that are associated with poverty and hardship first then supporting parents and babies with programmes, support services, education and skills training. Start with the belief that parents want the best for their children.

8) **WHAT'S GOOD FOR MĀORI IS GOOD FOR EVERYONE.** Work in a tangible and practically demonstrated Treaty of Waitangi partnership with Iwi and Māori to find solutions that work through a te ao Maori lens. Support what is working for Māori children who are flourishing in tikanga Māori environments like marae, kura, and in kapahaka. More marae in urban areas could provide a community-driven approach to preventing poverty and providing for healthy lifestyles for everyone – eg gardens, kai, kapahaka, sports, and whānau therapy. Comprehensive NZ history and te reo Māori should be taught in primary schools.

9) **BRAVE AND COMPASSIONATE POLICY AND LEGISLATION.** Use child impact assessment tools and be brave in co-designing policy and legislation. One suggestion was to employ community advisers to work in the DPMC poverty and wellbeing units – this would be genuine community-government co-design!

## More detail about the day...

### **A panel discussion hosted by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern**

with Shana Malio from the Great Potentials Foundation; Manny Matenga and Reira Reid, members of the Cannon's Creek community; Te Wai Coulston, a student from Auckland University; and Donna Provoost, Director of Strategy, Rights and Advice at the Office of the Children's Commissioner.

The Prime Minister introduced the panel by sharing why child wellbeing and reducing child poverty is an important issue for her, and what her hopes for the future are, including the aspiration that New Zealand be the best place to be a child. She then posed some great questions to the panel, and listened to their views and insights.

The conversation touched on various obstacles to child wellbeing such as material hardship, food insecurity, problems with social housing and feeling unsafe and isolated in communities where people don't know each other. Solutions and ideas for reducing child poverty included redesigning the welfare system and services so they are child and whānau centred, food in schools, the importance of relationships and having caring adults supporting children, early-years interventions (like pepi-pods) and ensuring that services are co-designed with children and families. Some key points are summarised below.

### **Prime Minister: "What would you do if you had my job? How can we make most change for children?"**

**Donna talked about the importance of addressing child poverty as a necessary first step to achieving child wellbeing and that children need to participate in the design of strategies to support their wellbeing.**

➤ *"Work on child poverty should be a foundation, so that the stress of food insecurity and insufficient housing and inadequate income to meet basic needs, is removed from the equation. How we do the next step is as important as what we do. We need to embed the knowledge of people*

*who have experienced poverty in the process to work out what needs to be done."*

➤ *"Every child needs to be safe and have the right to participate. When we ask children and young people what they want, they talk about play and joy and the ability to be a child and they don't have to worry about the stressors of having to stay at home because mum has to go to work. They should have the freedom to be a child. The Government can't provide joy and love, but they can*



left to right: Reira Reid, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, Shana Malio, Te Wai Coulston and Donna Provoost.

enable families to better support and care for their children.”

- “How do we help 250,000 kids have better lives? If we want transformational change, we need to be transformational in how we do it... We need to co-design with families and communities, and then be really flexible in how things are provided. That will take a real shift in thinking.

#### **Te Wai focussed on interventions in the early years; the importance of education; and on ways to level the playing field.**

- “Give an equal provision of wellbeing to children like pepi-pods; equal access to early childhood education and then education all the way through... It’s important to start strong and for that to carry on throughout everyone’s lives.”
- “For me it’s about security. How to achieve that? Through school; teachers who really care; people in the community that really care about you as well. That’s what it comes down to - people caring.”
- “It would be good to have a package for incoming parents; to equal the playing field. When visiting WINZ and others are looking through the glass at you in a way no one should be looked at.”

“A radical re-design of the system is needed. Community need to be at the centre; need to own the solutions” Participant

#### **Manny shared his experiences of making ends meet and the strategies he is using to provide for his children.**

- Manny described where he stays at Cannon’s Creek as “the slums of Porirua”. His family were offered a house and if they didn’t take it then they would be on a waiting list for 1.5 years. “I just try to make my house and environment as comfortable as I can for my kids.” “I remember growing up and feeling safe. Our neighbourhood was tight knit, everyone knew everyone... I want a place that is safe to walk around.”
- “We were trying to feed, pay power, gas bills on \$70 a week on a defacto benefit. We decided to separate, solo benefit made it more possible” Manny was working part time as a kitchen hand but had to give up his job to look after his baby. “We struggled; it was easier to split. Mo couldn’t deal with trying to raise both girls”
- “I need to give money to my ex-partner to help her with our daughter. It turned out she wasn’t being paid what she was entitled to and it took Work and Income 5 months to work it out; but during those 5 months, she was trying to feed a teenager.”
- “Budgeting courses helped heaps... only thing is they are only open once a week.”

“Minority groups don’t always feel included; I felt included today. It is not about money per se but about what can be changed in the community.” Participant

#### **Mo talked about the importance of kids staying in school, and having what they need (like breakfast).**

- “Kids need to go to school... I see too many kids roaming the streets during school hours... 90% of kids at kohanga haven’t had breakfast... We don’t have much but others have less... It starts with breakfast.” Maria and her oldest girl who is 17 started a breakfast club.
- “It comes down to schooling. Most parents can’t afford \$100 worth of books or \$30 for a calculator. But if we had a little bit more putea (money) and an adult that cares for each and every single little kid, that would be good.”
- “If organisations went into communities and put their hand up and said here I am, this is what I do, then child poverty would go down. Not many poor people know what is out there and what can work.”

#### **Shana focussed on the importance of relationships and tailoring services to the needs of families.**

- “We want someone in a child or young person’s world who provides a meaningful relationship; to have access to opportunities; so it comes down to connectedness and strong relationships around the child.”
- “For a lot of the stress that we see, it is about the fact they have spent \$20 on petrol to go to four different services that are 30 minutes apart in peak hour traffic; they had to wait three hours to get food; the stress is that they have to chase the help; rather than the services are where the families want to go. Why can’t we flip things, so that the help is where families are. Spend time not about surviving for the next two days, but kids having the opportunity to be kids; families can’t do this because they are too focused on getting food in stomachs.”
- “How do we make child poverty the floor and not the ceiling? A philosophical change. How do we do it quickly so that we get the benefits out there straight away rather than years later?”

#### **The Prime Minister focussed on listening to the stories and advice from the panel, and shared some of the things the government are starting to do to improve child wellbeing.**

- “Politicians think they are there to provide happiness; or to remove things that stand in the way of joy. If you are time poor or living in deprivation, or constantly living under stress, you don’t find your joy... It is hard to think about child wellbeing when parents are just thinking about putting food on the table... We are trying to be accountable. I hear when you say whether there is enough putea in your household matters.”

“Seeing our PM taking on the challenge of reducing child poverty gives hope to families and children.” Participant

**Judge Andrew Becroft, the Children's Commissioner challenged participants to embrace the opportunity to collectively weave together a dream for all children in New Zealand.**

Judge Becroft encouraged participants to think about big step change not just marginal improvement for the lives of children and their families. He talked about the Wellbeing Strategy's ambition to improve the wellbeing of all children and especially those with greater needs, while reducing child poverty. He said that 70% of children in New Zealand do well; 20% do badly, struggling with real disadvantage; and 10% do very badly, worse than other comparable developed nations. He said it is right that the Wellbeing Strategy focuses on the 20% and 10% but in the context of supporting all children to live up to their potential. He reiterated the importance of co-designing the Wellbeing Strategy with community groups, young people, philanthropic groups, and especially with input from children and Māori.

*"If you ask children what they want to feel well, you get a much more value-based description - a family that loves them; friends who care for them; a sure sense of their identity; and cultural connection."*

*Children's Commissioner, Judge Andrew Becroft*

**Anneliese Parkin, Maree Brown and Kristie Carter from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet outlined the Government's work on poverty reduction and the Child Wellbeing Strategy.**

They said they are not lacking in ideas but asked for help in structuring and prioritising as there will be limits to how much can be achieved straight away. They said the Child Wellbeing Strategy will be published in 2019 after extensive consultation including with children (assisted by the OCC). They will be looking at previous research that has taken place and looking at the outcomes of the various reviews taking place such as the mental health inquiry; the welfare review; and the Royal Commission inquiry into the abuse of children in State care. The intention will be to build on the strategy over time. The five broad concepts or domains of wellbeing they are currently working with include: safety; security; connectedness; wellness; and development.

*"Reforming the tax and benefit system is at the core of getting the right support to whānau"*  
Participant

**The Minister for Children and Associate Minister for Education Tracey Martin**

provided a short reflection on what she is hearing and how she feels about the current welfare system "it feels like the system comes before the people... Work and Income need a culture shift." She talked about needing to

put people at the beginning of the conversation instead of having an approach which starts with minimising risk. Her aspiration is for a system which starts with asking people what they need and going from there. Minister Martin talked about the need to address unconscious bias. She acknowledged that racism is a real problem in New Zealand.

**Peter Foese from the OCC** disrupted the table conversations to share a story about a young person in crisis who was helped to overcome obstacles by a youth worker who encouraged and supported him. Peter asked the group to think about 'how do we ensure that the projects and programs we design uphold their dignity and celebrate their uniqueness?' He encouraged people to take the time to care about people's stories; to hear their stories, and throughout the journey remember it's their story that matters most.

**After lunch, Professor Jonathan Boston presented** about what we can learn from the experience of other countries when it comes to addressing child poverty and in particular, why some countries (e.g. those in Scandinavia) been able to achieve, and then sustain, relatively low rates of child poverty and material hardship. Jonathan outlined the factors that have led to high child poverty rates in New Zealand and how our system is different to other countries.

He argued that how we design our policy institutions and their influence on the welfare state have a profound influence and that there are also cultural and labour factors at play. He said that New Zealand could not replicate Scandinavian models but that we need to modify our own systems over an extended period of time. Some of the key elements required include: trying to build a broad enduring cross-party commitment to low child poverty rates, enabling changes to benefit systems; increasing public expenditure in a sustained way; and changing welfare design, particularly working for families.

*"I would like to continue the conversation about how legislation, policy and structures and systems can enable caring."* Participant

*"Transformative change will take time; we need to fund longer than a 3 year cycle."* Participant

**Working together – work stations on shared strategies and solutions**

Building on facilitated table discussions, participants worked across four stations to capture and catalyse the range of thoughts, ideas, and strategies that surfaced. Kōrero at the stations considered what's working, improvements to present practice, values, and systems across local, regional national and policy levels. The purpose of the stations was to examine and broaden people's thinking

through conversations to find better ways and to identify directions. The aim of this exercise was to identify an emerging collective transformative vision that participants own. That they use the stronger connections made during the day to act on this vision once they leave Weaving our Strengths. These conversations and notes were captured by live illustrators and the summary themes outlined in the first two pages.

**A letter from young people.** The day closed with Satui Pitoua, a 15 year old college student from Lower Hutt reading a letter to the forum from young people. The letter was a compilation of some of the voices of young people that OCC has listened to. The letter encouraged the people in the room to be aspirational, to sustain the relationships they forged during the hui, and to continue to listen to the children of Aotearoa as they go forward to make positive change.

*“Put children and young people at the centre; listen to them; identify local community leaders; ensure communities can bring forward their own solutions.”*  
Participant

*Dear Adults*

*I do not think me and my family are poor, I don't like when people think that we are. But what I do know is if you don't have much money, you learn to be more caring and you know how to share what you have. When we know that someone is struggling, we have to look after each other.*

*When people say bad things about me or my family I feel shame and sometimes angry. It feels like I am failing, that my family is less important than others, and we are constantly reminded we are not doing well.*

*I want people to talk to me and ask what I think. When people don't ask me why I'm angry or sad, it feels like they don't want to know my story. They want to know about what is wrong in my life, but they don't want me to tell them how to make it right. I'm not a statistic.*

*I have dreams too. I want to go to school but I keep getting in trouble for my uniform being wrong when the right jersey for winter costs too much. You should make sure everyone can afford uniforms. My family didn't finish school, and I want to finish. Sometimes my brother can't go to school because he gets sick from the cold all the time. I know mum worries, and she has to stay home to look after him or sometimes I do so she can go to work.*

*If we could have a bigger house for my whole family and one that's warmer it would help. But I'm grateful we have a house. Some of my mates don't have a home. They have to move around a lot and stay at other people's places or when it's real bad, they stay in their car. Sometimes they stay here and that's ok.*

*I want to get a good education so I can get a good job to get rid of our mom's stress. It would change everything for my family. If I get a job soon, maybe I could help my brother do guitar lessons. He wants to learn but I know we can't afford it right now. And because mum works all the time she can't take us places. I will get my driver's licence as soon as I can and a job so I can do these things. My motivation is my parents. I want to make them proud and succeed on behalf of them and show others that they raised a good kid.*

*When people recognise me and my skills I feel I can do better and achieve more. I want to make a positive difference; it's just hard when people see me as part of the challenge, something that needs to be fixed. But we are not a problem to be solved. We are potential to be realised. We are not hard to reach; you just have to be bothered. So please be bothered.*

*Don't just talk about us and forget us. Come hang with us, talk with us, play with us, take time to understand us. If you feel that is hard, or makes you feel nervous, imagine how I feel standing here. But I am here because the voices of the children and young people who I have shared today need to be heard. They could not be here, they don't get the chance to be in places like this and share their stories. But you have the ability to go back into your communities and create spaces for them to stand and be heard, include us to make a difference in our world.*

*Today is one day, an important day where you great champions get to eat together, talk and listen to each other and make a great plan so things will be better. But tomorrow the reality for us might be another day of small meals, a cold house, a cramped car, missing school to watch a sick brother, even being separated from our own families... tomorrow we have to continue living in the world you create.*

*So please don't forget us as you make the change we need. Let us help create something better. Come talk to us too.*

*On behalf of the children and young people in Aotearoa, thanks for trying.*

**What next?** With work underway to develop the first Child Wellbeing Strategy, we hope you can take some of what you have shared and heard forward in other discussions in your communities, policy work or advocacy for children and their families.

Copies of the illustrations capturing hi-lites on the day, Prof Boston's presentation, photos and other materials from the day are available on the Children Commissioner's [web site](#).

*“Please weave in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child so it becomes embedded in thinking, policy, practice and law. It's a useful tool; it's good for children; and NZ has committed to honouring it!”*  
Participant