



Reflections and learning from *Great Start Taita's Journey*



Great Start was a respected children and family focused community-led initiative that ran for nearly a decade in the multi-cultural suburb of Taita in the Hutt Valley. It ended abruptly in mid-2017. In its wake a range of mixed emotions lingered - including relief, confusion, sadness, anger and hurt.

Twelve months later, Inspiring Communities was invited to help curate a final conversation to honour and learn from the *Great Start* Initiative. People who had been involved in *Great Start's* journey came together for one day to remember, reflect and draw out insights that could contribute to CLD in Aotearoa. They also hoped it would enable some healing for those who had been most deeply involved.

Community-led change is exciting, messy, slow, fast, excruciatingly hard, rewarding and challenging. International experience suggests a period of 10 - 14 years is required to meaningfully embed and sustain community transformation.

Great Start got a long way down that track before the walls came crashing down. Lots of people involved acted with the best of intent for the community and the people they cared deeply about. With hindsight - it's possible to identify some key factors that likely contributed to *Great Start's* demise.

These included:

- a slow and gradual loss of trust and connection between *Great Start* and the wider community as, over time, the organisation focused more and more on doing and surviving and lost sight of key principles of transparency, listening and actively reaching out into the community;
- when Barnardos sold *Great Start* house (its home base) the initiative had to find new premises. This proved very challenging and meant effectively starting again on the other side of Taita;
- an assumption that a truly community-led initiative should be fully held by the local community and that local people should be responsible for managing, governing and resourcing *Great Start*;
- the lack of sufficiently skilled local leadership, organisational and governance systems able to continue the empowering, collaborative and community-led ways of working with local residents that had evolved in initial phases.

Unpacking the journey highlighted a number of elements that both helped and hindered progress.

Some enablers on the Great Start Journey:

- **Backbone structure and support** – Barnardos loosely held the initiative so a new entity wasn't needed straight up, meaning those leading could focus on engaging, connecting, supporting and activating community.
- **Innovation mandate, resources and skilled staff** – meant the team could get on with trying new things to see what worked for Taita and could disrupt ways that social services like playgroups/midwifery appointments were delivered.
- **Values driven, deliberately learning** – agreed principles determined how things happened at *Great Start*, with investment in collective learning to support practice and next steps planning.
- **Holding space** – things were done in ways that supported local residents to step into leadership roles and/or actively contribute to projects.
- **A visible, homely base in community** – having a physical building immediately gave presence to *Great Start*, people could pop in and it offered them opportunities to contribute eg. maintenance, gardening etc.

Some disabling factors along the way:

- **Buildings not fit for community purpose** – while homely, run down facilities can be financial burdens that take up huge amounts of planning time and energy. Finding alternate community friendly premises in Taita proved challenging and destabilising to existing programmes and people.
- **Applying standard systems, rules and parameters to community-led responses** – while *Great Start* was a community-led initiative that had lots of freedom, it was also expected to behave in ways that met Barnardos organisational rules.
- **The impact of staff turnover on practice and continuity** – ongoing staff/leadership changes meant the essence of *Great Start* practice became diluted over time.
- **A perfect storm** – the last 3-4 years involved constant and concurrent challenges related to location, funding, leadership, staffing, governance and community ownership transitions.





So what?

Reflecting on *Great Start's* journey underlined key conditions for how CLD is best supported, funded, nurtured and governed – especially in lower socio-economic communities.

Key issues highlighted included:

- the need to *rethink community governance* structures so they can better empower community-led contexts and aspirations;
- developing *community spaces and places that are underpinned* not just by good design but by operating kawa or protocols that actively enable community ownership, participation and leadership;
- being mindful *not to overlay* social service expectations or bureaucratic rules onto community-led processes, responses and initiatives – or else the break through 'next practice' and innovation we're seeking will fail to emerge;
- more *investment in people and relationship* development – they are at the core of effective CLD;
- initiatives and individuals getting better at *practicing vulnerability* with funders, supporters and the community so we're all building skills that enable us to reach out and receive help, ideas and support in hard times, and before crises truly kick in;
- *consideration of specialist supporters* who without judgement, can be called in to help stabilise and support initiatives in crisis. This may be finding new ways to continue or let go but end well; and
- *valuing the CLD workers and leaders* skilfully navigating and enabling complex CLD processes and outcomes.

To read the full *Great Start* learning report click [HERE](#):

<http://inspiringcommunities.org.nz/reflections-and-learning-from-great-start-taita-a-final-kitchen-table-conversation/>

Knowing that reflecting on difficult times is challenging and relatively uncharted, the *Great Start Learning Curators* also shared what they learned through convening the reflection process.

They noted the importance of:

- learning as a powerful and neutral call to bring people together;
- starting slowly and carefully with 1-1 conversations to see where interest, energy and resistance lies. All are essential to help shape next steps planning;
- being thoughtful, paying attention not just to process (invitation, venue, facilitation) but also supporting participants before, on and after the day;
- being clear around parameters eg. no blame, multiple truths, enabling people to feel safe enough, encouraging honesty and saying what needs to be said, acceptance of non-closure;
- planning - but not over planning - knowing much of what happens will be determined by who comes and what's most on top for them. Keeping agendas simple and flexible makes it much easier to respond and adjust as needed;
- a skilled facilitator who's able hold things lightly, support the flow of conversation, deal with any conflict if it arises, encourage contribution and honest sharing;
- working as a learning team to help manage the fear, risk and the uncertainty that is the reality of curating difficult learning conversations.