



Reflections and Learning from *Great Start Taita*: A Final Kitchen Table Conversation

Observations and implications for
community-led development in
Aotearoa New Zealand



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While the curators have worked hard to reflect back the views of those involved in the *Great Start* Learning Day, they acknowledge there are multiple truths. While all care has been taken, all errors and omissions excepted.

All the pictures in this report are of children and families from Taita. We wish to acknowledge the ongoing work of Common Ground in the Taita community.

1. Introduction - An ending and a learning opportunity

Great Start Taita was a widely 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, Wellington. It ended abruptly in mid-2017. Bank accounts were empty and a decision made to close and liquidate. This brought shock waves within the Taita community as many, including staff, hadn't seen it coming. It was a hugely stressful and painful time for all those involved. In its wake, a range of very mixed emotions lingered, including relief, confusion, sadness, anger and hurt.

But alongside anger, pain and sadness also sit pride and joy. Many people's lives were positively transformed by *Great Start*, and life-long friendships made. People noted that the *Great Start* way of working went with them as they moved into different organisations and communities and that community-led development (CLD) had become their 'business as usual'.

In mid-2018, Inspiring Communities was invited to help curate and be part of a final 'kitchen table conversation' to honour and learn from the *Great Start* initiative.

On September 22nd 2018, a group of people who had been involved in various stages of *Great Start's* journey came together to remember, reflect and unpack some of the highs and the lows. The aim of the day was to draw out learning and insights that might positively contribute to CLD in Aotearoa, and to perhaps enable some closure for those who had been most deeply involved.





From this final learning gathering, a range of reflective responses have been crafted. While often raising more questions than answers, *Great Start*'s journey highlights some useful flags and reality checks for everyone working in CLD. It encourages us to keep thinking about what funding, nurturing, empowering, leading, governing, participating, working and sustaining community-led transformation in multi-cultural, urban communities really takes.

This learning report has five component parts:

2. **Key learning themes and implications** from our final kitchen table conversation¹ (pages 5-15)
3. **Convening the conversation** outlines the background to *Great Start* learning conversation, how we brought things together and what we learned along the way. (pages 16-19)
4. **Some personal reflections** on the *Great Start* journey. CLD takes and expects a great deal of love and emotional energy. It brings joy and hope, and also hurt and disappointment. Remembering the feelings of this work (and not just the theory) is an important element of learning. (pages 20-21)
5. ***Great Start* - a short history** offers an overview of milestones in the *Great Start* journey. (pages 22-23)
6. **The *Great Start* way of working** describes the values and principles that underpinned the initiative's work. (page 24)

While it may have formally ended, the legacy and impact of *Great Start Taita* remains significant. So what can New Zealand's community-led development movement learn from *Great Start Taita*'s journey? What do we need to put more attention and focus on?

The answers to these questions are neither simple nor straightforward.

For a start, there isn't one neatly packaged *Great Start* community story that is ready and waiting to be harvested. Instead, the reality is multiple truths, spreading over several years with many loose ends and different understandings about what happened at *Great Start* and why. Observations are also often deeply personal, and strongly influenced by the context, relationships and realities that framed each person's part and time in the *Great Start* story.

Caveats aside, what did we learn?

¹ Kitchen table conversations were synonymous with *Great Start*. At the *Great Start* house in Cooper Street, there was no front desk or formal reception area. Instead, visitors were welcomed as they entered and brought to the kitchen table for a cuppa and chat.

2. Key themes from a final kitchen table conversation and implications for CLD in Aotearoa

The eighteen people who attended the *Great Start* learning day on September 22nd 2018 shared their experiences and insights about what the initiative meant for them. We were an eclectic bunch: a mix of *Great Start* workers, Board members, residents, supporters, and funders. Together we reflected on the ups and downs of *Great Start's* journey, contemplated what brought us to the project (and to CLD more generally) and talked about what we learnt along the way. We didn't try to tell or make sense of the whole *Great Start* story or apportion blame. Instead, we bounced off each other's observations from different *Great Start* phases and tried to unpack the two big questions that seemed most alive in the room that day.

The big questions:

1. What enables resident engagement, participation and leadership in community-led development?
2. What structures, processes, practices and conditions do or don't enable CLD to thrive, especially in lower-socio economic communities?

As we all know, 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 acted with the best of intent for the community and the people they cared deeply about. In the end - and with hindsight - it's possible to identify some key factors that likely contributed to *Great Start's* demise.

Key factors that contributed to the end of the initiative:

- 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 reaching out into the community;
- the sale of *Great Start* house by Barnardos which meant finding new premises (at huge time/cost/stress/disruption to activities and relationships) and having to practically start 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*; and
- having sufficiently skilled local leadership, organisational/governance systems and resources to understand, sustain and advance the edgy *Great Start* way of working that evolved in initial phases.

"It feels like Great Start didn't close, it just ran out of money to run the programmes and activities which were left. So maybe finishing was actually okay, it was time?"



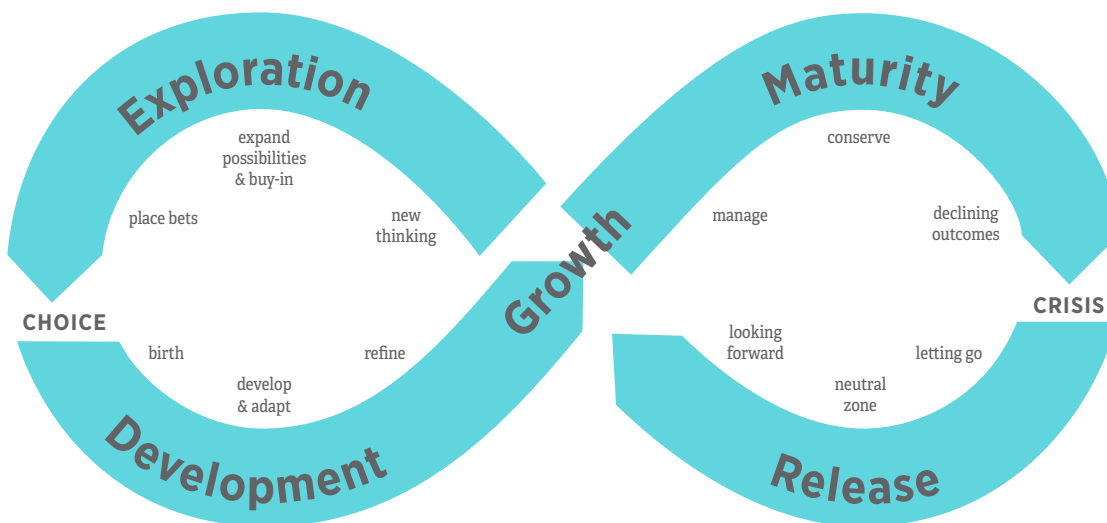
"I can think of a number of times in the Great Start journey where there was not transparency and people were not held to account. Too often, hard and difficult conversations were shut down. We need to be better at finding safe processes where disagreements and real differences can be openly voiced. A healthy culture allows challenge and debate."

"While Great Start is finished, the good still shines and the people involved are still doing good things elsewhere with other people and communities."

Insights from *Great Start* Reflection Day

2.1 Applying an Eco-Cycle learning lens

Given *Great Start Taita* involved a journey, from an Inspiring Communities point of view it instinctively made sense to relate reflective learnings to the Eco-Cycle. We have found this 'lifecycle' tool incredibly useful in helping describe, understand and process various stages of community change journeys and the traps involved.



Adapted from Mark Cabaj, Here to There Consulting – <http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/the-eco-cycle-mapping-tool>

In a nutshell, as in nature, there are phases of birth, life and death in the natural world that can be usefully paralleled with the evolution, development and adaptation of projects, organisations and collaboratives in community-led change efforts. In this way, change is best understood as an organic cycle of growth, decay and rebuilding. Knowing that sometimes we have to let some things go in order to let new things come helps us understand that things finishing or ending is part of a natural process, rather than something to be avoided or viewed as failure.

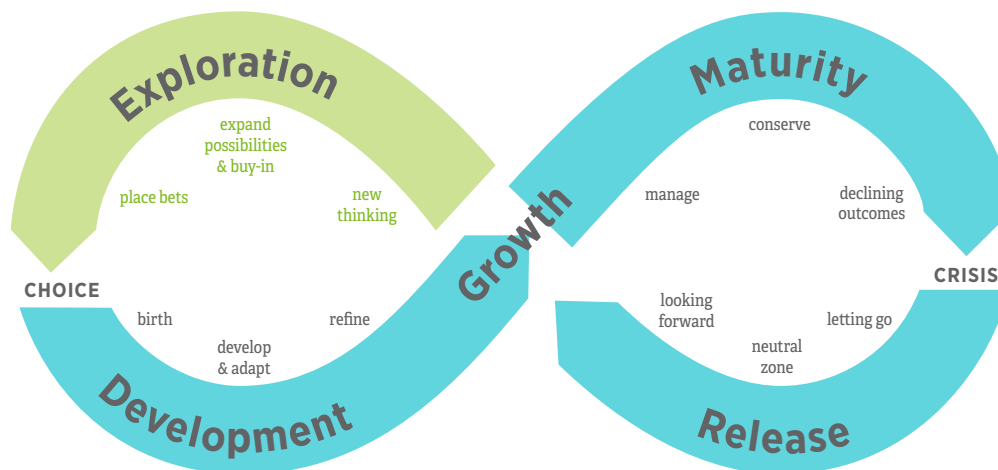
Of course, in reality, there is never just one eco-cycle but many at play. Communities are changing all the time. Sometimes they cycle through change at a rapid pace, and at other times, they build on loose connections to take two steps forward and then ten back, as noted in the CLD Theory of Change.

Overlaying the Eco-cycle and Great Start learning reflections allowed us to group key elements that were enabling and/or disabling during different phases of *Great Start Taita's* decade long journey.

In terms of sustainability and continuity in community-change efforts, what matters is a community's ability to manage and work through transitions associated with each life-cycle phase. Minimal disruption to people, energy, and forward momentum is always the ideal but sometimes just not possible.

Phases of Community-Led Change - What helped and hindered different stages on the *Great Start* Journey

1. Exploration: The Getting Started phase



What enabled the *Great Start* Journey

Structure – There were huge benefits from a tight/loose approach. By this we mean that being held by Barnardos enabled structure but there was also ‘free licence’ to create and build from local interest and action. Not having to create a governance entity or new organisation in the start-up phase was hugely beneficial.

Mandate and resources to engage/enable – Barnardos supported knocking on 1200 doors to see what people wanted. A strong trusted relationship between the Barnardos CEO and key *Great Start* staff enabled freedom to respond to what was emerging in real time. Staff had quite open job descriptions with financial backing to explore and create.

Values driven – Rather than following a plan, *Great Start* principles and values drove interactions and relationships from which local ‘action’ emerged (see *Great Start* way of working pg 24).

Right skills mix – Highly skilled staff could sense what was needed, were comfortable in emergence and were able to liaise between the different sectors, e.g. from MSD to the community, from the community to Barnardos, etc. This built confidence and trust at multiple levels.

A visible base – Having a well located building immediately gave presence to *Great Start*. Access

was easy, and the fact it was run down provided reasons for local residents to step in and help, with improvements visible to all.

Intentional learning lens – Resource was allocated to support team learning, reflection, sense making and next steps planning. *Great Start* was also linked with other communities on CLD journeys.

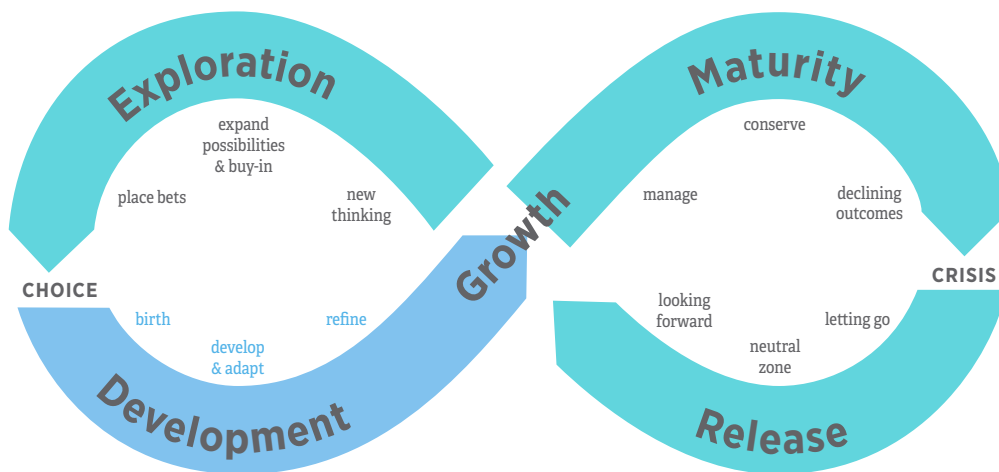
What hindered the *Great Start* Journey

Multiple lines of new-ness – A literal ‘blank sheet’ meant so much was starting from scratch and at a fast pace, e.g. relationships with community, within the *Great Start* team, with funders and supporters.

The building: an asset and a liability – Despite its central location, *Great Start*’s initial base at Cooper St was an old convent and not fit for community purpose. It was cold and run down, with many health and safety issues and no quick/cheap fixes. The building became a living dilemma for Barnardos, *Great Start* and the community – it was an impediment to the very work it was enabling.

Having too much – *Great Start* began with lots of generosity and funding support from Barnardos, MSD and Todd Foundation, amongst others. While this felt great, in hindsight having so much abundance at the start (and not having to think about or skilfully plan for scarcity) meant that *Great Start* had low resilience to changing times.

2. Development phase: *Great Start*'s programmes, activities and approach become clearer



What enabled the *Great Start Journey*

Taking a bright spots approach – Believing that the right things to be doing and backing were the things local people had energy for. This was enabled by asking the right questions, inviting reciprocity, focusing on relationships and proactively building trust.

Holding space – The team were able to support and enable projects, walking alongside those who also wanted to ‘do things’. This was done in ways that people knew and so, they felt they could ‘step up’ and either lead or contribute to what was happening.

Being disruptive – The team actively looked to do traditional things (like playgroups) in new ways that embodied a CLD approach and visibly demonstrated what different can look like for residents, whānau and other community support agencies.

Risking ‘with’ – Strong relationships and mutual respect within the *Great Start* team made risk taking easier. Making big calls with others was much easier than doing it on your own.

What hindered the *Great Start Journey*

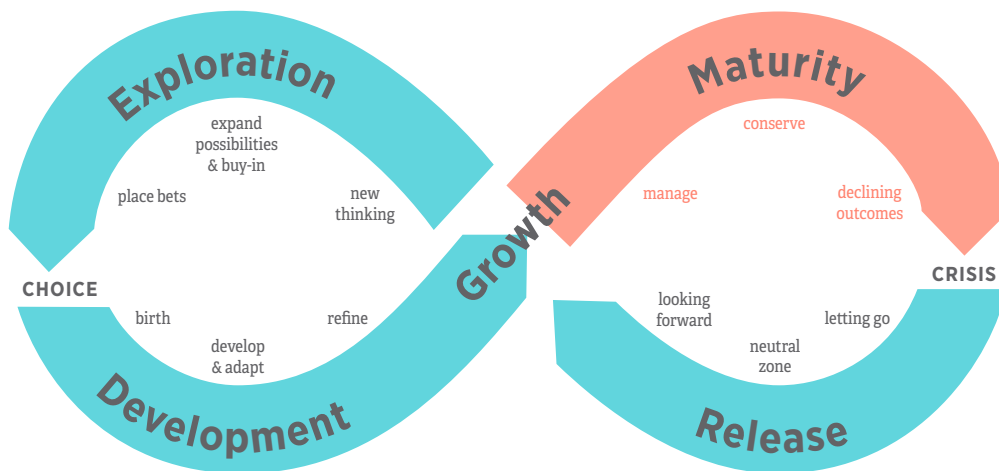
Applying standard systems, rules and parameters to community-led responses – Communities can do things that organisations or agencies can’t. While on one hand Barnardos gave *Great Start* free rein, it wasn’t without limits. Being held by Barnardos meant the same set of Barnardos organisational rules and expectations still applied to *Great Start*. This meant the full potential of community-led responses were never fully explored or truly tested, e.g. what does a community-led response to child abuse or family violence really look like? How might the responses of a social worker and a community worker or leader be legitimately different?

The building – The building and decisions about how to make it fit for purpose, took up significant time, energy and resources (e.g. engagement of architects, planning sessions, maintenance, health and safety issues). In some ways it may have kept *Great Start* locked into a space and limited the energy given to continually reaching out and finding new ways and new spaces for connecting.

“Don’t give a kid a ball unless you’re going to let them throw it.”

Insight from a Taita Resident and *Great Start* Supporter, reflecting on community-led initiatives needing room to do things their way

3. Maturity phase: Systems, processes, activities etc., are well established



What enabled the *Great Start Journey*

The *Great Start Way* – Because of the way local residents had been welcomed and supported, *Great Start* house quickly became known as a ‘trusted place’. Good news travelled and created an expectation of how local residents would be treated in advance of them walking through the door.

A welcoming home rather than a ‘flash’ service centre – The Cooper St house environment was homely, with a kitchen table, lots of pictures on the walls and a cuppa on offer. There was no formal front counter with forms to fill in. It felt familiar to local people who walked in the door.

Moving from one part of Taita to the other – While moving location had many down sides (see opposite) there were also some good things: new people were engaged, new relationships were created and set ways of doing things were challenged.

What hindered the *Great Start Journey*

Leadership transitions and maintaining the *Great Start way* – As key leaders/team members/managers changed, it got more difficult to maintain and transition the really innovative (edgy) *Great Start* ways of working into new teams, structures and

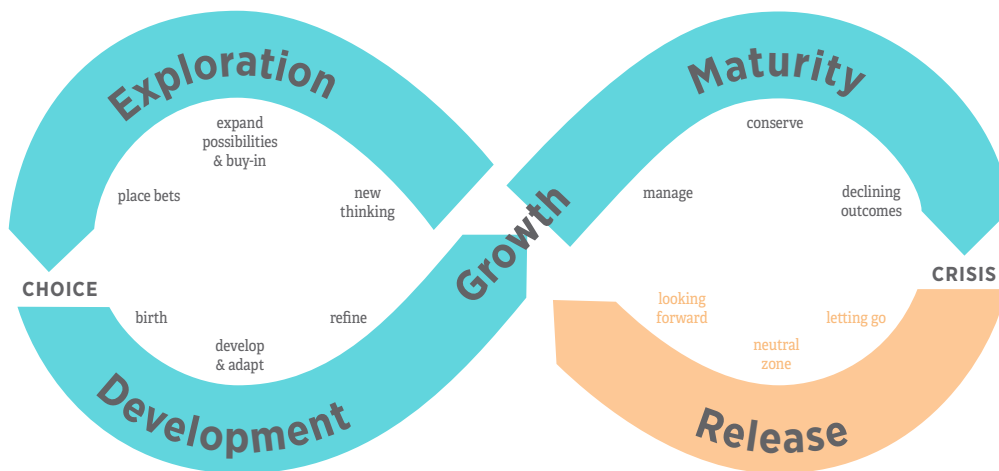
processes. Effective ways for working in a high-needs community (i.e. using highly relational, nuanced and intuitive strengths-based practice) were often hard to see, difficult to demonstrate to/teach others and not easy to show quick results from.

Handing back to the community – *Great Start* was seen as different to the rest of Barnardos: a promising experiment, but not really part of Barnardos’ core business. So when Barnardos became financially stretched, a decision was made to sell the *Great Start House*, for Barnardos to ‘exit’ its support role, and for a transition plan to be put in place to enable *Great Start* to be its own independent entity, fully community-owned and driven.

Moving from one part of Taita to the other – Finding a new base for *Great Start* activities took a long time, zapped energy from all involved and disrupted relationships and confidence in *Great Start*. The new, rented property needed a lot of work and didn’t have the same community feel. Programmes and activities lost momentum over this time.

In reality, *Great Start* was still developmentally young and not yet mature or resilient enough to weather the ongoing complex sustainability challenges it continually faced.

4. Release phase: Positively address crisis times, adapt strategy and approach, stop doing some things/do others differently etc.



What enabled the *Great Start Journey*

Acting as an umbrella organisation for common ground

– Supporting and fund holding for a new DIA funded CLD initiative at Walter Nash Park that was headed by a previous *Great Start* team member helped strengthen community relationships, provide some practice continuity in the *Great Start* team and enabled new CLD activity in the Taita community.

Key programmes continued by others – With the decision to close *Great Start*, the community rallied to find new ways to continue some programmes and activities that were highly valued and relatively easy to transition, e.g. The Friendship Group, the Toy Library, and participation in community building events such as Tumeke Taita.

What hindered the *Great Start Journey*

Not knowing what was lost until it was – Some said the ‘real magic’ of *Great Start* Cooper St never made it across the train tracks to the new site. At some point, *Great Start* lost its sense of innovation and had largely become a standard community house providing funded services for the community.

A perfect storm – While some level of challenge and crisis is to be expected, the last 3 – 4 years of *Great Start* saw a perfect storm of multiple ongoing and overlapping challenges (including financial, key people/leadership transitions, maintaining the *Great Start* ‘how to’, governance capacity). These could not ultimately be worked through to enable stability and for the next phase of *Great Start* to emerge. This came at great cost to many of the people involved.

Feeling stuck and not able to ask for help –

While an imminent financial crisis was known at the governance level, others involved in *Great Start* (staff, funders, the community, etc.) were not informed until after a decision to close had been made.

Not finishing well – At the close of *Great Start*, emotions were high: a combination of sadness, pain, anger, shock, frustration and sheer exhaustion from the struggle. Perhaps it was the way things ended that people were most sad about. Some felt insufficient attention was paid to care and relationships, celebrating the journey, transitioning what was left and ‘finishing well.’

“Great Start met people where they were at. For me it was a place to visit with my kids and chill out. It was my sanity. There was no judgements, the focus was on people as people. Both me and my daughter became involved in community things because of Great Start.”

Insight from a Taita Resident and *Great Start* Supporter

2.2 So what?

Implications for CLD in Aotearoa

Re-thinking the structures that support local leadership

The structures and models that we impose when we are advocating for (or funding) community-led initiatives may unintentionally be undermining the success of our work, especially in lower socio-economic communities. In continuing with a 'one size fits all' approach to community governance, we maybe trading off active participation and citizenship as a result.

The reality is that many local residents want to 'do things'. But, they don't necessarily want to sit on committees and/or spend time creating or being part of traditional governance entities. We also know from parallel School Board of Trustee experiences that governance skills in high needs communities are in particularly short supply.

It's time to broaden thinking and understandings about community-led governance models and find new mechanisms and models that better give effect to community-led intents.

This raises some important questions.

- Why does 'good' community governance have to mean an elected board of local people and an independent legal entity? How might key community engagement, strategic oversight and financial accountability functions be enabled in more creative and participatory ways?
- What kind of roles and supports might other aligned existing organisations very usefully play to support community-led initiatives and intents? How might they provide umbrella support, while at the same time authentically enable independence for local collaboratives so that they local people do drive what happens and how?
- How might we also honestly negotiate the different risks and tensions that new community governance models bring up for communities, host organisations and funders?

A home and an anchor but it's more than walls

Having a building or a physical base for people to come to, be it a shipping container, an open space or a community house, is really important. It's a place to call home that's visible for local people, open and accessible and alive with local contributions and caring; a local symbol of hope, that reflects local identity, aspiration and pride; a place that welcomes and nurtures possibility, people and local activities. These were all key anchors in the *Great Start* journey.

But while a physical building becomes a key container for CLD – it's what happens inside that really matters most and is often unseen – the 'how to' work with people and new possibilities. There was a general feeling that "not all of *Great Start* travelled from house 1 to house 2".

This comment related to the perceived loss of:

- creative spaces such as the experiential learning space for kids and the stay and play space for littlies and parents
- CLD practice magic which influences how people are treated and listened to, the kind of relationships that are nurtured and formed, knowing when and how to best hold space, and to support other's potential contributions.

A lot of this intuitive practice wisdom is based on people and relationships rather than recipes.

What else could be done to name, teach, share and transition this CLD practice magic? But equally (and paradoxically), by seeking to nail down CLD and codify what it looks like, do we also run the risk of actually killing it?

Consciously negotiating the CLD edge, with courage

We need to get better at engaging with the parts of the 'standard system' that we most disagree with. This raises the need to be more intentional about when it could be helpful to make our rule breaking more explicit and seen. How do we genuinely hear and respond to others' discomfort with what we are doing differently, not just ignore it, or dismiss it as them not understanding us? *Great Start* has highlighted that we need to find a way of talking about how to do (and fund/support) community-led child care and safety without just ignoring or rejecting the current system. It's really hard to stay courageous and innovative AND also to engage respectfully with the system that holds on tight to what it knows and expects.

Expecting abundance and scarcity and navigating both with more creative skill

We should expect and more actively plan for both abundance and scarcity. We should see the dangers in 'unskillful' abundance (not making the most of the resources we have) as well as the opportunities in scarcity. Is seeing scarcity as 'bad' part of the problem? We feel trapped, don't face it, don't talk about it, and may not look for new or different opportunities as a result. And do we risk arrogance and distance from others in times of abundance? When we have resources and times are good, are we always using and sharing what we have and the power that comes from having, in the best long-term sustainable way?

Staying connected, always reaching out, practicing vulnerability

Developing and embracing a wide web and depth of relationships seems to really matter. A real CLD risk marker may be too much turning inward, self-preservation and not enough reaching out, especially when things get tough. Building a safe and honest network of trusted friends and fellow practitioners and actively practising the discipline of being vulnerable, even in the good times, should become more pivotal in our practice. When or as crisis looms, when we are stressed and frightened and chaos surrounds us, often doing this for the first time is just too difficult.

It's good to ask ourselves if we really talk about what is hard and not going well often enough with our trusted friends and funders. If not, why not? What's stopping us? Is it our personal fear that we might be perceived as weak, wrong or not in control? Or is it about potential loss of brand strength, reputation, mana, funding or confidence in our organisation or initiative? Or both? Honest answers to these questions are important— along with careful consideration of what might need to happen next to change things.

The people, the people, the people

It's not organisations, plans or principles that are at the centre of community change efforts: it really is people. We say this all the time, but too often we try and have relationships with organisations and systems, not the people in them. It seems to really matter when key people change or leave local initiatives, or partner and funding organisations, or when people get hurt, or there are disagreements, or when new people arrive in our community, team or work place. There are so many drivers for doing projects and getting to outcomes and defining principles. But the internal relationships, funder relationships, community organisation and local resident relationships, and critical friend relationships all need attention too. How do we find time and give priority to this as well? How might we better monitor and manage internal fluctuations that impact on relationships, morale, focus and efficacy of our work?

Who can you call....

Great Start's abrupt ending reminded us that communities and CLD initiatives in crisis exhibit many of the same signs as individuals and families in crisis: fear, despair, helplessness, isolation, powerlessness and anxiety about what to do next. Asking for help in these contexts is incredibly difficult. But what does or should transparency in crisis look like? What are the markers? Who can or should be able to raise the flag? What are our collective responsibilities to support communities endeavouring to make change? Who supports the supporters?

We wondered about the potential for an 'on-call' specialist support team who could be called upon in times of need. This person could, with no judgement, help groups and initiatives scan and make sense of the hard stuff. He/she could then help scope and stabilise, and/or support release and ending in ways that honour, respect and mark a key moment in time.

But even when it's not a potential end of life crisis, what and where are the support nets and structures that give change makers, innovators and local leaders a safe space to retreat, regroup and refuel when needed?

Do we expect too much and offer enough?

In our quest for learning insights during our *Great Start* reflection day, we couldn't help but be struck by the enormous skill required to do and to lead community-led development work well. We often talk about community workers and champions as 'good sorts', 'salt of the earth', 'kind and caring', 'able to make magic happen often with nothing much.' This is great. But does it really do justice to the complexity of the work that so many community navigators, weavers, coordinators, brokers, and activators are doing balancing the tightrope?

These people often have to balance:

- rule breaking for innovation and responsiveness AND the requirement to keep everyone safe
- staying under the radar and slowly building up credibility and connections AND showing results and proving your worth
- never giving up AND knowing when to let go or walk away
- nurturing communities that are struggling AND only doing things that community members want or lead
- finding time for relationships AND having strategy, funding, collaboration and strong financial management skills



- authentically negotiating accountabilities to the community you're part of or working in AND with the organisation who employs you, AND key supporting funders and partners. And what about your own family, whānau and friends?
- managing complex community, organisational and personality politics, all of which can be brutal to navigate and make positive headway through
- keeping going and smiling... when really, underneath, you're edging ever closer to burning out.

An overwhelming emotion on the day was the enormous respect that community workers, managers, leaders, governors and doers in the community-led space deserve, and too often don't get. Too often people are working too hard, and too long, and alone. How do we get better at seeing, respecting and genuinely nurturing the people in this work? How can we reshape roles, responsibilities, expectations and remuneration that recognises the 'specialist generalist' skillsets required to support CLD well?

3. Convening the conversation

The collective conversation to reflect on the *Great Start* Taita journey was born out of a discussion between three people involved in the early days of *Great Start*; Thalia Wright, Karen Clifford and Jenny Blagdon.

Why we wanted to reflect

Our discussion centred around our confusion about *Great Start*'s abrupt closure, the fact that feelings were still raw in the community, and the legacy *Great Start* left with each of us, including the questions we still carried. This led to a shared realisation that there was lots of learning to be had from *Great Start* that had never been unpacked.

From the very beginning in 2005, *Great Start* had been about trying new things, taking risks and learning when to stop and let go of what wasn't working. It seemed strange then when *Great Start* shut down suddenly it was no longer ok to talk about it. The way *Great Start* ended made it feel like this wonderful experiment had instead become that "failed venture"; something to be ashamed of, or to talk about in hushed tones.

But none of us felt it had failed. We realised it was only a failed project if we didn't take the time to learn from what had happened and to share those learnings with others. As we talked it over, we recognised the value in acknowledging the experiment that was *Great Start*. We wanted to examine the really hard stuff, what didn't work – warts and all.

Given the ups and downs of the *Great Start* journey and the strong emotions still present for many people, we knew that any discussion would be challenging. But we hoped that it might allow for some healing to occur. Before the end of our discussion, we had named our intention: to create a process with the dual purpose of harvesting the learning from the collective experience of *Great Start* and supporting healing to take place.

How we went about it

We began by seeking out a small number of people who had been part of *Great Start* and asking for their thoughts. Each person we spoke to acknowledged the importance of what we were setting out to do. Not everyone was sure they wanted to attend but they were open to hearing more about what was planned when more details were developed.

Having received this feedback, we reached out to Inspiring Communities (IC), an initiative that had supported and walked alongside *Great Start* since its inception until very near the end. IC were very keen to be involved. They also acknowledged the bravery involved in exploring what could have been done differently and emphasised that these were aspects of CLD (and social innovation more generally) that don't get enough attention. IC offered to help both co-host the conversation and unpack/harvest the learning.

Key components of our process

A small team was formed: the three of us, along with Megan Courtney from IC. Our initial discussions focused on working out what kind of reflection method would best meet our shared aims.

After considering a number of different options, we made the decision to host a semi-structured reflective conversation.

We committed to keeping the conversation simple in order to conserve our organising time, energy and limited resources, and to do something sooner rather than later. While we were open to what might be gained from the conversation, at a minimum we committed to harvest and share whatever learning was offered on the day.

We met regularly online, at least every few weeks over a 4 month period, to consider what such a conversation should involve. We also regularly checked in with people in the Taita community and others who had been involved with *Great Start* to get their input and ensure they were comfortable with our evolving plans.

Our challenges and confusions

Framing a learning conversation and settling on a process of invitation felt challenging. We came to realise that learning conversations about difficult ‘endings’ rarely happen and there are few models to follow.

Initially we focused on clarifying the intent of the gathering, considering who might be involved and thinking about how to deal with some of the difficult emotions that the day was likely to provoke. It’s fair to say we continued to wonder about the usefulness and appropriateness of the day and whether it was ok to ask people to revisit a journey which had created not only meaning and purpose but, for some, significant pain and anguish. Our ongoing concern was that it might distress people and that such a day could reignite conflict and re-open divides in the community. We also wondered whether people would be willing to be in the same room together to have what might well be a truly difficult conversation.

While acknowledging our doubts, we kept our focus on learning, reminding each other that although the day might be difficult for some, without the chance to talk together, nothing would be learned. In coming to this decision we drew on the wisdom of Art of Hosting Facilitator and Master story teller, Mary-Alice Arthur. She suggested that in order to ensure people felt ‘safe’ AND were also able to go to the more difficult places together, we frame the day with the message that “Discomfort ≠ Unsafe”. She stated that it’s important to ensure people aren’t derailed by the emotion in the room. Mary-Alice set out some ground rules that would make sure people were open to hearing from and looking after each other. They would also ensure people wouldn’t safeguard one another too much.

The ground rules were:

- stay engaged
- experience discomfort
- speak your truth
- accept non- closure, not everything will be resolved.

Our decision to keep going was also supported by the external facilitator we had brought on board. Our concerns about the depth of emotion that might be present on the day meant we wanted to find someone who could understand the context, hold the group and ensure we maintained our focus on shared learning. Adam Cooper from Creative Leadership was recommended to us, so we met with him to explore his interest in the work and his fit with the day’s intention. Luckily it was quickly obvious that he would be a great fit, as Adam not only wanted to participate in the day, he too wanted to learn more about how to facilitate learning conversations at the completion of significant projects or initiatives. Adam took part in a number of the group planning calls from that point on.

The invitation and the warm up

As well as giving us advice on safety, Mary-Alice Arthur also helped our group to consider how we would warm people up to the day before they arrived. She emphasised the careful crafting of the invitation. Initially we wanted to invite a smaller group to keep things manageable. However, upon reflection, we realised this didn't fit with *Great Start's* kaupapa of inclusivity and openness. In the end, the invitation (see pages 25-27) was sent out to people who had been involved throughout the journey: community members, volunteers, paid workers, funders and external supporters. We decided that whoever turned up on the day would be the right people. We anticipated between 10 - 30 people might come.

A 'save the date' message² was emailed approximately six weeks before the event, while we continued to craft the invitation and find a suitable venue. This first flyer reiterated our core learning intention:

What can we learn from *Great Start Taita* that can positively contribute to community-led development in Aotearoa/New Zealand?

It also included an offer of support to anyone who wanted to talk more or needed some help to enable them to attend.

The final invitation was again clearly framed around the inquiry and aimed to warm people up to the purpose of the day. Two questions were offered to help people reconnect with the *Great Start* kaupapa of collective learning, experimentation and emergence and with the legacy it left them:

- What particular moments or times captured what it meant to be part of *Great Start*?
- How did *Great Start* make a difference to your life, your work and your thinking about community?

Some of us reached out to a number of people personally, by phone, to extend the invitation and to allow them the opportunity to ask questions and be supported as they considered their attendance. These discussions weren't always easy but the more they happened, the more we realised how essential they were in helping people make a decision about whether to come and in preparing them to participate, if they chose to. There was no pressure for people to attend, or judgement made if people decided not to. They were encouraged to make the decision that felt best for them. Just receiving the invitation and having the chance to discuss the day provided an airing of people's thoughts and feelings, and an honouring of both *Great Start* and their involvement in it. People were being given permission to begin talking and thinking about *Great Start* again.

The day itself

The conversation was planned for a Saturday, to enable those who had work and other commitments during the week to attend. We knew we would need the best part of a day to have a meaningful conversation. Although our preference was for people to attend for the entire day, or at least for the morning, this proved impossible due to people's various commitments. So while most people were present for the whole day, some only attended for either the morning or afternoon session. In the end, this enabled two quite different conversations involving 18 people.

While we had a loosely structured agenda for the day, things panned out a bit differently to what we'd planned. Whakawhanaungatanga was followed by an exercise that allowed us to place ourselves in the timeline of *Great Start's* journey. Under Adam Cooper's skilful guidance, we gently focused the conversation on what was on top for those present and took their lead on what they most wanted to explore. It was far from linear. Conversation topics naturally emerged and just took their course.

² See Appendix 1 on page 27 for our Save the Date message and final invitation.

We paid attention to honouring people and their offerings as they left at lunchtime. We also took time to personally introduce, acknowledge and welcome those who arrived for the post-lunch session and provided space for their voices and sharing. In the last part of the day we used a range of objects in the room to articulate our observations about what attracts us to a place or CLD initiative, what holds us there and what allows us to leave. This was a great way to bring us to an end of day closure and a place of letting go.

During the day there were tears, hugs, laughter, opinions voiced, memories shared and questions openly asked of ourselves and others. It felt honest, not forced, and brought much food for further reflection and thought.

As curators, it felt like we had achieved what we set out to do.

Our key learning moments

- Don't rush the planning and development phase: give it time.
- Don't let the fear of getting it wrong stop you. If the conversation feels important to you, it probably does to others as well.
- Ensure potential participants have the chance to ask questions about the day to help them decide whether or not they wish to attend.
- Learning conversations are not technical exercises. Pay as much attention to people and relationships as to crafting good process.
- Plan what you'll do but don't over-do it. Trust the wisdom in the room to guide what needs to be focused on and support people to say what needs to be said.
- Base your learning conversation in a space that feels welcoming and homely, with lots of natural light and space to move. For us, hosting well meant meeting people in the carpark and walking in with them so they felt connected with someone from the moment they arrived. We also provided good food and made time for eating and sharing informally together over the day.



“What struck me was the life affirming/life giving effect of being involved in Great Start. This was very evident in the people that attended, despite the organisation no longer existing. For me, this gave hope. The form might change but the ‘real’ heart-felt effect of Great Start lives on.”

Adam Cooper, Learning Conversation Facilitator

4. Great Start: Some personal reflections




Untitled poem

The House at Cooper St, Taita

*A place with heart, welcoming
Where people could come, heal, grow.*

A learning journey

*... the people
... the process
... the insights
... reflections.*



*The head-tingling conversations about energy and possibilities
connections, and feeling on the edge of 'knowing'
or coming to know something important.*

*But what exactly?
Is this real?*

What is 'it'?

*What should I have paid better attention to then,
and how?*

I could never settle this in my mind...

*What or how to write about the work of and at
Great Start...*

*The experience of being part of the journey, also
removed – a critical friend –
observations, learnings, reflections with the team on the
work, changes
and what now?*

*The emergent, responsive, open-to-possibilities
creative impulse of the 'call' that seemed to be awakened
in, by and through
the Great Start team 'being there' – at that house, on
that land, in that community.*

The 'call'

*What was the call?
Who was it for or to?
Was it to each and all who were present?
There was always a response – Call and Response – from
each and all, in time.
Perhaps those head-tingling conversations were
a response
a tangible noticing of the call that touched, disturbed,
made its presence felt
before sliding back into gray matter, matters of the day.*

The kitchen table conversations

*Intentional, inquiring with those who were there
and ever expanding to embrace those who dropped by
or others who watched and listened, waiting to join in –
to catch a moment and feel the warm surge of inclusion
and belonging.*

*Growing community...
A call and response.*

The "Clothes line conversation"

*A collective revue of highlights and insights from the
Great Start journey*

*dramatically presented by members of the team with
flare and props from the story sack
at an Inspiring Communities gathering at
Waiohanga, Otaki.*

Spaces, vibes and transformation

*Noticing, feeling, respecting the different energies in
the house*

*– warm, safe, restless, murky, cool, unresolved / resolving,
healing, guiding.*

Working with curiosity and generosity with the house

*– warmth and creativity adorned the tired walls
and rooms*

*– the principles tree: inclusive, connecting, trust,
strengths-based practice, Ako, voices of children,
reciprocity, Nau te rourou, naku te rourou, ka ora te iwi
– grown from and heralding – the way we do things
around here.*

Spaces inside and out were transformed into play, learning and nourishing places ...

*The sensory room became the Kiwi experience, then
Underwater world*

*for children's wonderment and exploration
– a collaboration between Great Start and the Learning
Connection.*

*The garden – a variable feast of vegetable plots, colour,
chooks, and a hot house made with recycled plastic
bottles – all grown with local children and adults
and the inspiration of a local Creative.*

*The local kids' park redevelopment – co-created by
Council with local children.*

*Children presented their submission of ideas in person
to Council*

*Councillors and staff enthralled by the children's
presentation
continued to work with local children, whanau and
community
to create a park with an authentic local vibe.*

The Great Start team expanded

*with community volunteers
collaborations with other people and agencies
local children, families/ whanau, and many others who
dropped in
stayed and played
and kept coming back.
A call and response.*

*The seeds of community, connection and possibilities
were planted.*

*Vicki Wilde
September, 2018*



Another day with Great Start

A group of people who are committed to learn for the 'greater good' took the opportunity to rekindle relationships, friendships and memories. Great Start brought us all together – a project, a place and a possibility

We all came I think, to honour Great Start and the time we had together.

Quickly we entered in to a 'space' that was alive and authentic with people just being themselves, a gathering built on trust, caring and learning.

This was a thoughtful crafting of an invitation to share the good and not so good of our time with Great Start. The place where we sat together had a familiar feeling of home, with wooden walls, touches of homeliness, and a wonderful garden, with home cooked food.

It only took a short time to 'see each other in the Great Start story' a time line of coming and going. A time line that allowed each of us to look backwards and forward. The time line kept unfolding throughout the day, with the essence and philosophy of Great Start still alive today; demonstrating that the time line still exists beyond the 'project'.

Holding the back-story of Great Start and the time line of activity we were all somehow able to go deeper into the story and to surface the learning quickly. Guided gently by Adam, we all learned to hold this space together. Something else was happening in the room, something invisible but present with us.

Carefully crafted questions, reading the room, reading the tone, holding the process lightly and being open to what the day needed to express, were aspects of the gathering. A process that helped the group, and individuals, to reveal more of themselves. This was such a warm feeling, a feeling of touching the essence of what Great Start wanted to be in the world.

We laughed, we cried, we listened, and we explored together on that day. We created a day together that honoured Great Start and started the healing of a memory that was.

Great Start connected us all. The many strands we held were woven together into an invisible cloak around us and within us... for a day, maybe longer.

A day, a delight, a smile and a tear too.

Thank you for touching my soul once more.

Karen Clifford



5. *Great Start Taita* – a short history...

While conversations in Barnardos about Taita began back in 2005, the *Great Start* community story formally began in early 2008 when staff from Barnardos knocked on 1200 doors and talked to residents about service needs and their aspirations for Taita. Rather than more services, locals said what they wanted most was to connect with other residents and existing local services.

Barnardos listened and decided to support the creation of a community innovative hub known as *Great Start* in an old house that they owned in Cooper St.

Great Start took a community-led development approach, working alongside Taita's diverse residents to grow a connected community where people felt safe and welcome and able to develop answers for their own lives. The *Great Start* team had both resources and permission to be creative and try new ways of working to see what worked for local people.

A broad range of resident-led activities and projects were initiated with a focus on children and families, often in collaboration with other service providers. These included toy and tool libraries, community events, whanau support, planning the upgrade of a local park, women's friendship groups, cooking classes and kitchen club, community gardening, stay and play groups, baby packs for new Mums, the 'My Story' children's voices project, supporting Arohanui Strings (children's violin group) and forums to address pressing local issues such as healthy housing.

Alongside Barnardos, *Great Start* was enabled by a range of funders and supporters including Ministry of Social Development, the Todd Foundation and Hutt City Council.

In 2012, Barnardos decided to sell the *Great Start* house at Cooper Street and support the creation of a new Taita community entity to continue the work of *Great Start*. A Barnardos funded transition manager was put in place to support this process.

The *Great Start* Charitable Trust was formed, with *Great Start* governed by a locally-based Board of Trustees from mid-2013. Not all members of the *Great Start* team transitioned across to the new entity. Creating both a new organisation and governance structure required considerable planning and effort – much of which was unseen in the community.

With the sale and celebratory goodbye to the *Great Start* house in October 2014, *Great Start* activities became mobile for a few months. Finding a suitable new base in central Taita proved difficult, stressful, very time consuming and unsettling for all involved.

In early 2015, *Great Start* finally found a new home in an industrial building on Eastern Hutt Road – on the opposite side of the Taita. This brought both the need and opportunity to build relationships with a new community.



Rebuilding momentum with more limited resources, in a new location, and in a building that needed a lot of work to be fit for ‘community’ purpose proved challenging during 2015-6. It prompted *Great Start* to refocus. Restructuring at both Board and organisational levels again resulted in key people transitions, and a largely new team of people running *Great Start*. While working in CLD was the aspiration, it was a struggle to have time/resources to operate in a highly innovative/developmental way.

A mix of long-standing *Great Start* activities continued in different ways through 2015-17. New initiatives, such as the weekly Koha Café and associated hospitality training, being a distribution centre for the Naenae Fruit and Vege Co-op and supporting the Common Ground project based at Walter Nash Park brought in new sparks of community-led energy and connection.

Financial and organisational challenges continued through into 2017. The sudden pre-Christmas departure of the *Great Start* manager saw the Board Chair transition into a management role to provide stability and continuity of the *Great Start* vision. However, with no money to continue operating, the Board made the difficult decision to close and liquidate the Trust in July 2017. Some *Great Start* programmes were picked up and continued by others in the Taita community.

6. The *Great Start* way of working

Great Start Taita was underpinned by a number of key values and principles which collectively influenced what happened, how and with who. They included a focus on:

- People rather than providing services or being of service to the community. Working with the community, not on the community. Moving at the community's pace, in their way, to achieve their priorities.
- Valuing everyone, meeting people where they are. Seeing everyone as a potential leader and contributor rather than a client or customer.
- Being strengths-based and relational. Engaging, welcoming and hosting whoever walks through the door with a cuppa and a chat at the kitchen table. No appointments, no waiting room.
- *Great Start* workers as 'community weavers'. They were tasked with building trust and respect by walking the talk, doing what they said they would, practising ako (teaching and learning), acknowledging and supporting cultural diversity and fostering inclusion.
- Looking and listening for 'bright spots'. That is, supporting and empowering local people and the ideas and activities they wanted to progress.
- Encouraging the voices of children to be heard, so tamariki were actively involved in their community.
- Reciprocity. As well as receiving support, enabling opportunities for people to give to *Great Start* and their community.
- Being curious, courageous and creative, with permission to try new things, make mistakes and do things differently, while also having fun.
- Innovation and learning mind-sets. Taking a learning by doing approach, making time for reflection and sense-making and understanding the collective journey being taken in Taita.
- Actively fostering collaboration and modelling new ways of working between service providers. Creating networks of supporters and like minds to support Taita-led initiatives.

APPENDIX ONE

Our Save the Date Message and final Invitation to a *Great Start* Learning Conversation

A GREAT START GATHERING – Save the Date SATURDAY 22 SEPTEMBER

Kia Ora

With the support of Inspiring Communities, a small group of us (Karen Clifford, Jenny Blagdon, Megan Courtney and Thalia Wright) are planning a Great Start Gathering.



We really hope that you will come and be part of this conversation.

Great Start began as an experiment. Learning (with an attitude of curiosity and openness) was a core principle of the Great Start approach. In that spirit, we want to get together to celebrate, honor and learn from the ups and downs of our collective Great Start journey.

We are working with some experienced facilitators to shape a day that will be warm, safe and open. We hope that the day will be one more ‘kitchen table conversation’ where we can share our stories and support each other to heal, learn and grow. Our aim is to:

- mark the end of Great Start as an organization with honour and generosity; and
- harvest the wisdom gained from Great Start to share with others involved in, and supporting, community-led development in Aotearoa New Zealand

Do you see value in this idea of a gathering? What do you want to get out of it?

We are still planning the details of the day and will send you a full invitation in a few weeks. But for now it would be great if you could:

- **Save the date: Saturday 22 September.** The venue is in Naenae and we expect the day to run from about 9.30am until about 4.00pm. We would love you to be there if you can.
- **Let us know if you are likely to come:** We will then know who to send the full invitation to. Our hope is that those attending can be there for the whole day.
- **Get in contact:** If you have any ideas about what we do or discuss on this day, or concerns you would like to raise, please let us know. We welcome your ideas, questions and input.
- **Tell us how we can make it easy for you to be there.** If you want to come but there are practical issues stopping you (childcare, travel costs, work, family commitments etc) please let us know. We will see what we can do to help.
- **Feel free to pass this email on to others.** We have sent this email out to about 30 people. We have taken care to include people from all parts of the Great Start Journey (staff, Barnardos, Great Start Trust, funders, community supporters). But there may be people we have missed. Feel free to forward this email on to others. Everyone is welcome. We only ask that anyone who does want to come emails us directly so that we can send them the full invitation.

Please get back to us by replying to this email - GreatStartLearning@inspiringcommunities.org.nz Or if you want to talk about anything at all, please call or text any of us. Our numbers are at the bottom of this email. We are looking forward to seeing you all soon.

Ngā mihi

Karen (022 611 2988), Jenny (0061 427 187 180) Megan (027 678 8622), and Thalia (027 355 6977).
Great Start Learning Conversation Curators

A GREAT START GATHERING SATURDAY 22 SEPTEMBER

Kia Ora Ano

We'd like to invite you to a conversation to honour and learn from Great Start, an initiative whose journey has now come to an end, and one in which you played a key part.



When: Saturday September 22nd 9.30-4pm.....please join us for a cuppa from 9am

Venue: Wesley Rātā Village - 249 Rātā St, Naenae.

RSVP : If you haven't already, please let us know you're coming so we can make sure we make enough lunch! Email greatstartlearning@inspiringcommunities.org.nz

If you have any special dietary needs or requirements, please let us know.☺

One Last Kitchen Table Conversation

We believe it is important to acknowledge and pay respect to the work done for so long by so many, and perhaps most importantly, to learn from the many ups and downs that occurred along the way so we can share this with others who might be interested.

The day will be framed the day around one central question:

What can we learn from Great Start Taita that can positively contribute to community-led development in Aotearoa/New Zealand?

Please get in contact if you have any questions or would like to chat about anything prior to the day.

We look forward to spending time and reflecting with you on Saturday 22nd.

Ngā mihi

Karen (022 611 2988), Jenny (0061 427 187 180), Megan (027 678 8622), and Thalia (027 355 6977).

Great Start Learning Conversation Curators

PTO for some more info about the day.....

A little more on what's planned.....

We have asked Adam Cooper to be our facilitator for the day. Adam has not been involved in Great Start but he is a skilled, experienced facilitator who can help us work with the complexity and challenge that is sure to be present, while remaining curious and open to what is emerging. We have met with him and are confident he gets what we mean by a 'kitchen table' type conversation.

To get the most from our time together, we will spend some time building up a sense of our shared story and joining our dots. We think this is important because not everyone knows each other and it will help to have the deeper conversation we believe is possible. For this reason, while we know that not everyone is able to be with us for the entire day (although we're hoping most can), we do ask that you are with us **at the beginning** of the day and will understand if you have to leave early. We are very appreciative of your giving up some of your precious weekend.

We are aware that while there was much to be celebrated in the Great Start journey there were also many difficult times and we very much want to ensure that each of us feels safe to participate. One challenge in this is to also ensure that we don't equate safety with comfort.

We'd like us to consider creating a space together where everyone feels safe 'enough'; that we look after and care for each other, while also being open to hearing from one another and not safeguarding each other so much that we can't edge into the difficult places together. Because, of course, this is where much of our learning will lie.

On the day we may make use of active methods in our conversation - simple activities where we stand or walk together to stimulate our reflection and learning. These will not be physically strenuous but comfortable footwear is recommended.

WHILE THERE'S NO FORMAL PREPARATION YOU NEED TO DO AHEAD OF THE DAY, YOU MIGHT LIKE TO THINK ABOUT.....

- **PARTICULAR MOMENTS OR TIMES THAT CAPTURED WHAT IT MEANT TO BE PART OF GREAT START.**
- **HOW GREAT START MADE A DIFFERENCE TO YOUR LIFE, YOUR WORK, AND YOUR THINKING ABOUT COMMUNITY.**

Who's Coming

At the moment, we're expecting around 15-20 people to attend the day. It is still an open invitation. If there are others you know who you think would like to be there please feel free to pass this invitation on.