



Homebuilders Family Services

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Submission on More Effective Social Services – NZ Productivity Commission Issues Paper

Homebuilders Family Services is an independent community agency working in the North Rodney area.

We have been operating for 25 years proving a “wrap around” approach, to local families under stress; our programmes include intensive home based Family Support (usually relating to parenting and/or relationship issues), therapeutic programmes for youth and children, information and advice to people on low incomes and parenting and life skills courses.

All our programmes are free to access; to ensure people can get support at an early stage, rather than waiting till a crisis strikes and also to encourage families to stick with us until the work is done, rather than when the money runs out.

We work across the large rural area of North Rodney, this comprises of many small communities, with little in the way of local infrastructure.

Introduction:

We believe that a number of the basic premises of this issues paper are flawed. Most importantly describing the sector as a “market” exposes the ideological framework which drives the underlying assumptions of this issues paper. We are concerned that this review is in reality another step towards creating opportunities for making profit from vulnerable people, rather than actually addressing the underlying causes of the problems being faced by individuals/families/whanau and communities.

These underlying assumptions mean that the issues paper is focused on “servicing problems”, rather than addressing the underlying causes of those problems. This approach may be very effective for those seeking to create profit making opportunities from hardship, but this approach will be ineffective at resolving and reducing the key underlying issues over time.

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There seems no real understanding that many of the major problems faced by the people we work alongside e.g. poverty and homelessness are not individual problems alone. While these issues are faced by individuals, there solutions are largely structural. These problems will not be resolved by merely shuffling who gets the inadequate and very expensive housing stock, or who gets the low paid and insecure jobs.

Core structural factors that impact on individual's families and communities and which cause poverty and serious disadvantage are largely beyond the scope of a social services delivery framework to solve. Many structural factors appear to be worsening.

It is important also to understand the history of contracting and service delivery. From 1991 to 1993 the government brought in a competitive contracting model, which created a plethora of competing agencies. In determining an appropriate model for contracting and service delivery, a 'one size fits all' approach fails to recognise that solutions to serious long-term problems must be tailored and premised on the understanding of specific localised problems. Solutions must be flexible enough to meet multi-faceted issues. Causes are complex and require multiple methods and approaches.

We endorse the 'whanau ora' approach that puts the person at the centre. We stress the importance of building functioning families and healthy communities as critical. A 'targeted' focus on the individual will not be enough to solve complex problems. Social service delivery must provide for a range of service types and relationships that cater to people with single simple issues through to people and families with a complex range of needs.

The issues paper does not appear to recognise the critical importance of data analysis and interrogation of evidence. Where is the academic research? It seems that huge amounts of research done in collaboration with the sector to date seems to have been ignored in this process. A clear overview and understanding of social service structures are extremely important in any decision making around proposed models and future structures. We urge key people in Universities who understand the history of social services be brought into the conversation and assist with evidencing good practice and models of working.

The community sector is very often the 'poor cousin'. We urge that the funding/resourcing of the community to deliver social services should have

some 'parity' with the cost of resourcing government service delivery. We need to empower communities rather than only focus on the individual. A thriving social services sector is VITAL to a well-functioning society.

The issues paper proposes ranges of funding/contracting models. Again we caution against a one-size fits all approach. The strengths and weaknesses of different models evidenced through experience and evaluation should inform any contracting implementation model. Attempts to establish a more joined up, wrap around, consolidated, collaborative and integrated sector is a worthy aspiration, but we also believe that it is important to think further about why social services have developed the way they have around separate programme areas? Often this is to meet a specific social need.

Specific specialisation may be meeting an important need in the community and a particular programme may have delivered many gains and outcomes that a new contracting model cannot afford to lose.

What is important to any new contracting/funding model is the type of relationships it fosters between central government, local government, and the multiple providers in the community sector.

Our reservation with the one-size fits all approach relates also to the results based accountability outcome framework, which we use ourselves. Successful evaluation recognises differences between people, places and programmes. The requirement of differentiation raises doubts over the efficacy of a single common outcome framework such as RBA promoted by the current government. Outcome goals and measures should be developed and established where the delivery takes place. It should be based on effectiveness of service delivery or a determinant of programme shortcomings as the basis for improvements and not just as a reporting tool. Reporting with this framework can create considerable work for the provider without the benefit of activating any real learning and improvements in service delivery.

A far more effective and relevant system is the Social Auditing model as its aims and processes are congruent with the organisation using it, we have previously used this model for measuring the outcomes, impact and strengths and weaknesses of our programmes and organisation, but without suitable resourcing it is very hard to maintain this extra work.

Along with a more place-based approach to social services, we also want to advocate the benefit of the smaller providers who often know their own local

areas 'backwards' and are very familiar with the history and development of local social issues. They can be extremely responsive to local issues and understand what is required to solve these specific issues locally. We warn against a model, which sees big national providers taking over the work of smaller providers. Many significant gains and important knowledge would be lost with this particular model. A joined up/collaborative 'continuous and active learning approach that allows for specialisation would address the diversity and complexity of social issues and needs far more effectively.

Greater acknowledgement is required about the role of structural factors and inequality as key determinants of health and well-being and therefore as drivers of demand for community services. The key role of community services providers is to be responsive to the needs of the most disadvantaged and inform government of the issues and gaps to ensure that resources and services are directed where they are most needed in an effort to reduce inequality and increase the health and welfare of citizens. As outlined in the recently released research from Victoria University, a worrying trend is that being a 'voice' for the most disaffected and contributing to the making of good policy at a local and central level is seen merely as 'advocacy' and as a subversive role to undermine government. We stress that advocating for new solutions and informing policy plays an extremely important and necessary role in communities. Agencies need to be able to alert government to important factors and issues around service delivery. The making of relevant innovative and therefore effective policy needs to be a collaborative exercise between communities, agencies and government. This process is critical to the design of 'Better Social Services delivery.'

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