

A fair chance for all: Breaking the disadvantage cycle

Submission to the Productivity Commission

My name is Ruth Herbert. I am a fifth generation tauiwi New Zealander. My submission is grounded in my personal experiences as a survivor of domestic violence and sexual violence, living on welfare as a solo parent while trying to heal my traumatised children to ensure they didn't continue the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage into their lives.

My views are also grounded in my academic and professional experience and from many years of working alongside victim survivors of domestic violence and sexual violence. I have a Master of Public Policy (dist.) and have worked in a wide variety of paid and unpaid roles – all trying to improve New Zealand's system response to violence against women and children. These have ranged from being an independent researcher, commentator and consultant, co-founder of The Backbone Collective, victim/survivor representative reviewing ACC's sensitive claims clinical pathway, Executive Director of the Glenn Inquiry and Director of Family Violence at the Ministry of Social Development.

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and have input into the design of this important inquiry. I believe that reducing life-course and intergenerational disadvantage is the single biggest opportunity New Zealand has to build a healthy thriving society and an economy that is strong and sustainable into the future.

The complex array of social issues that underpin disadvantage

There is an extensive body of evidence showing that multiple social problems directly or indirectly have a negative impact on wellbeing. In focusing on people or collectives who are experiencing multiple facets of disadvantage across one or more mana, it is critical that the Commission recognises that these issues rarely occur in isolation.

An individual, whanau or community experiencing 'deep disadvantage' will experience many (if not most) of the issues on the list in the table below. I have separated the primary issues that underpin deep disadvantage into three clusters. The issues listed as 'secondary' are generally flow on effects for these primary clusters. For example, the evidence shows that experiencing violence and abuse lies behind many of the other primary and secondary social issues. See Appendix 1.

No two individuals, whanau or communities are alike – every presentation of disadvantage will comprise a different mix of social problems, that have each occurred in different ways, at different times and had a different impact – there simply is no 'one size fits all'.

Some issues and circumstances cause or contribute to others, some occur because of earlier problems and others are occurring alongside each other. Most are directly underpinned by one or more of the contextual issues listed in the lower box. For example, it is critical that everyone working on this inquiry understands that persistent and intergenerational disadvantage is invariably underpinned by persistent intergenerational unresolved trauma. This is well understood by many of

those working with our most deeply disadvantaged. For example, the Oranga Tamariki practice website says¹:

- Tamariki may be impacted by multiple forms of trauma over time including:
 - historical trauma and racism through colonisation in Aotearoa
 - systemic trauma through interactions with systems of care
 - intergenerational trauma across families and generations
 - direct trauma to individuals.
- Cultural alienation and discrimination can intensify the trauma experienced by tamariki. Culture is closely interwoven with healing from trauma.
- Child welfare systems and practices can mitigate or exacerbate impacts of trauma.

Primary issues and circumstances	Secondary issues and circumstances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family violence • Child abuse and neglect • Children exposed to intimate partner violence • Sexual violence and abuse • Substance abuse • Mental Health • Disability • Poverty • Welfare dependency • Homelessness and housing needs • Unemployment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violent crime • Bullying • Recidivism • Youth Crime • Poor health and chronic health problems ie obesity and diabetes • Failure at school • Youth who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) • Suicide – particularly youth suicide • Incarceration • Teen pregnancy • Truancy • Behavioural problems
<p>Contextual issues</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Intergenerational and unresolved trauma ▪ Impact of colonisation ▪ Ethnic inequality ▪ Gender inequality ▪ Institutional racism 	

Life-course, persistent, and intergenerational disadvantage

Persistent disadvantage is the central theme that permeates almost all New Zealand social problems and many of our health problems. It is the thread that connects them. These issues cycle through generations – often occurring in multiple earlier generations and without effective interventions to break the cycle they then pass on to future generations.

It is well understood and accepted by government that there is an intergenerational cycle of family violence and sexual violence and that exposure to this type of violence has lifelong impacts on child and youth wellbeing². Likewise, there have been studies done on many other iterations of an intergenerational cycle – putting different social issues from the list above at the centre.

¹ [See here](#)
² [See here](#)

Disadvantage is not a linear or static condition. It is important to understand that individuals, whanau and communities can cycle in and out of a state of disadvantage multiple times through their life. Further, what constitutes disadvantage can continually change for each individual, whanau and community, as their situations and experiences change. While in some cases disadvantage might not appear to be persistent it is the cumulative impact of disadvantage (through this and earlier generations) that is the most debilitating, entrenched and difficult to break free from.

It is important that the Commission recognise that within the 'life course' group, being able to exit the state of disadvantage may be as straightforward as receiving income support or retraining after a job loss. But equally the 'life course' event could, without appropriate intervention and support, become the beginning of a new intergenerational cycle. For example, a woman finding herself trapped in an abusive relationship might not have experienced disadvantage earlier in her life. However, she quickly finds herself in a severely disadvantaged situation. Leaving the relationship does not automatically mean she and her children are safe and have all the resources and opportunities required to rebuild their lives. Further, she and her children been subjected to unimaginable trauma, and this is highly likely to lead to multiple ongoing health and social issues that the children can then take through to the next generation.

Important conceptual considerations

The multitude of issues that come together to create disadvantage are what the literature defines as complex problems. They are sometimes referred to as wicked problems. A complex problem is not solvable by reductionist or sequential approaches. Trying to investigate or address one problem for one individual or whanau ie homelessness – without addressing all the other health and social problems they are facing, including intergenerational trauma, the impact of colonisation etc - will fail to make a real impact on their overall wellbeing. This is precisely why persistent intergenerational disadvantage is a complex problem and as such cannot be broken into its constituent parts or examined and responded to via silos. The business case for Social Bonds prepared by KPMG for the Ministry of Health³ noted:

Part of the complexity of the most intractable social issues is that they are cross-sector and cross-agency. This means that a number of levers need to be pulled to address a particular social issue and usually a variety of agencies will be responsible for pulling the different levers. The two main problems created by the cross-cutting nature of social issues are coordination of efforts and poor incentives where benefits accrue to an agency which does not have influence over the necessary levers.

Complex problems tend to be non-linear and difficult to understand and attempting to remedy one aspect of the problem can reveal or create unexpected further problems elsewhere. A very helpful and easy to read publication, that I have referenced many times in my work, is an Australian Public Service Commission document⁴ which has now been archived but remains as relevant as ever. This document provides insightful and sage guidance that I believe could help guide the design of this inquiry. For example:

Usually, part of the solution to wicked problems involves changing the behaviour of groups of citizens or all citizens. Other key ingredients in solving or at least managing complex policy problems include successfully working across both internal and external organisational boundaries and engaging citizens and stakeholders in policy making and implementation. Wicked problems require innovative, comprehensive solutions that can be modified in the light of experience and on-the-ground feedback.

³ KPMG Social Bonds Business Case for the Ministry of Health. July 2013

⁴ [See here](#)

All of the above can pose challenges to traditional approaches to policy making and programme implementation.

Recommendation

That all levels of the inquiry reflect the fact that persistent and intergenerational disadvantage is a complex problem and as such, linear, traditional approaches to investigation, planning, policy formulation are likely to fall short.

Activities, outputs or outcomes?

There seems to be some confusion about whether the overall purpose of inquiry is to focus on activities, outputs or outcomes. This may not seem important, but it will have a direct bearing on the design of the inquiry.

The Commission's website suggests the inquiry's focus will be at an activity or problem identification level: 'The Government has asked the Productivity Commission to prepare the Terms of Reference for a new inquiry into the drivers of persistent disadvantage within people's lifetimes and across generations'. The consultation document, however, indicates that the purpose is more focused on outputs or short-term outcomes: '... a new inquiry into breaking the cycle of persistent disadvantage'. Breaking the cycle is the merely the first step in a long road to recover from the persistent and deep disadvantage that took generations to create.

The system must be able to ensure that individuals, whanau and communities are able to break the cycle and then to continue thriving through their life and to thereby to pass this new state of wellbeing on to the next generation – so as a country we achieve long-term outcomes.

Recommendation

That the overall goal of this inquiry be to determine how New Zealand can achieve sustainable long-term outcomes of thriving and wellbeing.

Equal opportunities or equal outcomes?

There is often confusion and conflicting definitions of what is meant by these and other related terms. The final report of the Commission's inquiry 'More Effective Social Services' contains a useful and succinct description:

Equity has many dimensions. These are usually expressed as goals such as:

- equity of access – each person should be provided with the means to be equally able to access a service
- equity of opportunity – each person should be equally able to choose whether or not they make use of a service
- equity of inputs – each person should receive an equal amount of resources
- equity of outputs – each person should receive the same service
- equity of outcomes – each person should have their condition raised to a common standard
- equity of relative improvement – each person should be improved by a similar increment

It is unclear whether the inquiry's underlying vision will be that all New Zealanders should be equally able to choose whether or not they make use of a service (opportunity), or, whether they should have their condition raised to a 'common standard' (equitable outcome). The title 'A fair chance for all: Breaking the disadvantage cycle' infers the vision is 'opportunity' - a fair chance. This is reiterated on page 2 of the consultation document: 'Society cannot guarantee equality of outcomes

for people, as these are partly dependent on people's choices and innate characteristics (eg, personality)'. This suggests that the Commission believes people are experiencing persistent and inter-generational disadvantage because they have not made the 'right' choices. And it infers that breaking free of the cycle of disadvantage is a matter of choice.

Seeing the end goal as equality of opportunity reflects the economic theory of social choice. Through this lens all citizens would have equal opportunities and be equally able to 'choose' whether they make use of the resources available.

It is equivalent to saying if we get Tama to school and give him an opportunity to learn and access the resources the school has to offer, he will have the same opportunity to succeed educationally as all other children. But Tama is a victim of child abuse and his home life is far from safe. Tama's father was also abused as a child, failed at school, was homeless at 14 and has been unemployed most of his adult life. Most of us who have worked for years at the coal face of some of New Zealand's most entrenched social issues, know that Tama is highly unlikely to break the cycle without much more than just opportunity. In select places, the consultation document does seem to acknowledge this, for example (pg4); 'Even if a disadvantaged child works hard and makes the best possible choices, they are less likely to have as good outcomes as a child from a less disadvantaged background.'

Narrowing the scope to equality of opportunity would contradict what Government is saying elsewhere. For example, the Government's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy is clearly focused on equality of outcomes:

The Strategy recognises that all children and young people should experience good wellbeing, regardless of their circumstances. It also recognises that to achieve greater equity of outcomes, some children and young people need more support. The Government has signalled in this Strategy that it will take a proportionate universalism approach to achieving equity for all children and young people. That means access to quality, non-stigmatising, culturally appropriate universal services, supplemented with further support as needed. Applying this principle will mean every child and young person has the support they need to participate fully in society and to reach their potential.

The Ministry of Social Development's website is clear that promoting equality of opportunity is NOT the end objective, but rather the steppingstone to achieving equitable outcomes within NZ society:⁵

Reducing inequalities is a whole of government policy encompassing both social and economic initiatives. The reducing inequalities policy aims to reduce disadvantage and promote equality of opportunity in order to achieve a similar distribution of outcomes between groups, and a more equitable distribution of overall outcomes within society.

I believe what we should be striving for is much more than a 'fair chance' – more than equal opportunity. I believe New Zealand should be striving towards creating a society where we have more equal outcomes for all.

Recommendations

1. That inquiry be focused on equitable long-term wellbeing outcomes.
2. That the title of the inquiry then be changed to reflect this objective – perhaps to something like 'Everyone reaching their potential: Breaking the disadvantage cycle'.
3. That the inquiry be based on social science theory, trauma-informed theory, behavioural change theory and systems theory, and supported by economic theory. That economic theory be used to further supplement and contextualise these rather than being the primary theoretical framework.

⁵ [See here](#)

System failure not individual failure

Individuals, whanau and communities cannot break free from the cycle of disadvantage and thrive long-term unless there is a system to support and enable that to happen. If the 'solution' to breaking out of persistent disadvantage was just a matter of resources and capabilities, we would not need this inquiry. Our efforts to date have failed because the system is fragmented and inconsistent, with gaps and overlaps, delivered in silos that do not reflect people's lives. 'The system is failing the most disadvantaged families and communities'⁶.

Recommendation

That the primary objective of the inquiry is to design a system that achieves long-term equitable wellbeing outcomes

Strength-based or deficit?

The Commission will need to decide whether the most effect methodology for the inquiry is to look inward or outward - backward or forward? The consultation document explains that Te Oa Maori approach is strengths-based (thriving), whereas the similar western approach is deficit focused (disadvantage). If we look through a Te Oa Maori lens, we are more likely to get things right for Maori, and if we get it right for Maori, we will get it right for everyone.

It would be inappropriate for me as tauwi to comment on which Te Ao Maori framework(s) are most appropriate for this inquiry. I note the Commission's intention to draw on He Ara Waiora during this inquiry. There may be other Te Oa Maori models that are also relevant or that would complement He Ara Waiora in a social setting. For example:

- Puoa-te-ata-tu – which is as relevant today as it was when published over 30 years ago and has widespread support in the social sector.
- Te Whare Tapa Whā - a Māori model of health and wellbeing developed by Sir Mason Durie nearly 40 years ago and still used by many.

The consultation document says (pg 6): 'It is worth noting this [He Ara Waiora] framework is strengths-based, while most data we have is on the absence of those strengths (ie, deficits)'. The reason we mostly have deficit data is that the majority of the work to date in this area has used a deficit lens. New Zealand has a plethora of reports about gaps, barriers, and failures, and that detail the social problems that individually and collectively lead to disadvantage. As Einstein famously said: 'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results'.

To produce yet another report that uses the deficit lens would be akin to continuing to 'do battle with the problem in the darkness'. This inquiry is a unique opportunity to take a more outward and forward approach - to use this inquiry as a vehicle to turn the issue of persistent disadvantage towards the light – to focus everyone's sights on how to create a society where everyone thrives. This approach would directly align with the Labour-led government's focus on wellbeing ie the Child Wellbeing Strategy and the Government's wellbeing budgets.

Recommendation

That the focus of the inquiry be on establishing a strengths-based vision for the future – one where all kiwis can thrive and designing a system that will enable that to be achieved.

⁶ Page 7 of the consultation document

Focusing on children will be the best opportunity to break the intergenerational cycle

Our tamariki and rangatahi are generally the ones who are most impacted by persistent and intergenerational disadvantage. Furthermore, we know that the earlier we can intervene in the intergenerational cycle, the more successful we are likely to be in disrupting, and ideally breaking, the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.

One of the principles of the Government's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy says,

The best outcomes occur when there is quality early support - early in the life of the child or early in the life of the problem. Adverse experiences early in a child's life can magnify and accumulate beyond childhood and adolescence, with life-long negative impacts.

The lives of children and young people are inextricably linked to those around them. If we place children and young people at the centre of our efforts to break the cycle of disadvantage, we will by default be also focusing our efforts on their families, whanau and their communities – if we get it right for children, we will get it right for everyone.

If the inquiry looks through the lens of tamariki and rangatahi it will align with, and build on, the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

Recommendations

1. That the inquiry is conducted using the lens of children and young people – that they are placed at the centre of this inquiry.
2. That the inquiry recognises that if we get it right for our children and young people, we will get it right for all New Zealanders.

Focus of the research effort

As a complex problem persistent and intergenerational disadvantage cannot be fully understood or solved by traditional reductionist or sequential approaches⁷. It will therefore be critical that the inquiry's research agenda reflects is designed within this context, for example, bearing in mind:

- The ever-present danger of looking too narrowly.
- The need to use a holistic rather than a linear, traditional approach.
- To understand the issues and design a model for the future will require multiple community organisations and those with lived experience to be integrally involved.
- There are no quick fixes and simple solutions.
- The solutions to involve changing the behaviour and/or gaining the commitment of individual citizens.

One of the biggest risks for the inquiry is that it gets trapped in the detail and spends a disproportionate amount of the time and effort examining individual social problems and the system failures through a deficit lens. This should only be done where that is required to inform the future.

There are already multiple reviews, reports, strategies and plans available about the constituent parts that collectively result in persistent disadvantage and examining how the current systems are failing our most vulnerable citizens. Many of these have been focused within an individual policy/departmental silo or on only one of the relevant social, health and economic issues. Others

⁷ [See here](#)

have been undertaken at a community level but have not necessarily been used to inform work at a national level. Rather than duplicating earlier efforts, the inquiry could best add value by collecting, collating, analysing, and distilling all this information. If after doing this, there are critical gaps in the information required to fulfil the objective of designing a system for the future, then new qualitative research could be undertaken.

I don't support doing 'deep-dives into particular topics' – or particular silos. I think the inquiry would add greater value by:

- collating existing information on the extent to which the multiple component issues underpinning disadvantage are connected
- the evidence showing that responding to one component issue in isolation from the others will have little effect on reducing the overall situation of disadvantage.

This would help everyone working across government and within the traditional silos of planning, funding and service delivery to understand that continuing to develop strategies, policies, funding streams of services to respond to one social problem for one individual or whanau ie homelessness, in isolation from their other health and social problems will fail address persistent disadvantage.

I do not believe IDI is helpful to understanding more about those who are stuck in persistent disadvantage and their characteristics. IDI has some potential relevance for a linear, traditional approach to policy formulation. But the administrative data used for the IDI does not provide this context in which complex social problems occur. It is therefore potentially misleading and counterproductive and is where so many studies have failed in the past.

Conversely, I strongly support the Commission using data from the Growing Up in New Zealand (GUINZ) Study. As noted in the consultation document the data from this study are rich and could tell us more holistically than the IDI about what factors most advantage and disadvantage children experience and the context in which they occur. Using this data as the basis for the inquiry would align perfectly with my recommendation that the inquiry be conducted using the lens of children and young people – that the inquiry recognises that if we get it right for our children and young people, we will get it right for all New Zealanders.

The consultation document lists one of the possible priority projects for this inquiry as: 'Exploring how particular life events and experiences, and the cumulative impact of multiple events, can trigger disadvantage (eg, major or chronic illness, injury or disability, redundancy, being a victim of violence/crime or other trauma), that persists'. To extend our understanding of disadvantage, I suggest this idea be extended to consider how persistent disadvantage can result in multiple levels of trauma and become the drivers of further disadvantage.

As noted in the consultation document (pg7): 'Whenever people or collectives don't thrive all of society loses out'. One of the major but often misunderstood impacts of disadvantage on all New Zealand society is the economic cost. In addition to defining the social costs of persistent disadvantage it will be critical to try and quantify the economic costs.⁸ It has taken generations to create the situation of endemic disadvantage that we have in Aotearoa, and it will take generations to break the disadvantage cycle and achieve the goal of long-term wellbeing for all. This will require

⁸ Some economic analysis has already been undertaken around the cost of child abuse and intimate partner violence that will no doubt be directly relevant (available at <https://library.nzfvc.org.nz/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=4549>)

long term investment and commitment across all political parties. Articulating the potential returns for the whole economy will be critical to securing long-term investment in this area.

The primary focus of any research the inquiry undertakes should be on designing a system that will enable individuals, whanau and communities to:

- break the cycle
- recover from the historical and persistent trauma
- continue thriving through their lives and to thereby to pass this new state of wellbeing on to the next generation.

To understand why the current system is not fit for purpose the inquiry will need to understand the life journeys of the most disadvantaged families and communities. This would involve looking through the lens of individuals or whanau affected and the front-line workers to work tirelessly to help them. It is extremely sensitive information and cannot be obtained top down – it must be gathered by community people who are known and trusted. Some of this work has already been done, for example, Tamaki Regeneration⁹, the Southern Initiative¹⁰, the Backbone Collective¹¹.

The most valuable area where ‘research’ can assist the inquiry to design a system for the future will, I believe, be a reviewing and collating relevant literature and practice examples about promising strength-based models. For example:

- Whanau ora is focused on increasing the wellbeing of individuals in the context of their whānau, it is whānau-centred. It differs from traditional social and health approaches that focus solely on the needs of individuals. Whānau ora recognises the strengths and abilities that exist within whānau and aims to support and develop opportunities that fulfil potential.
- The Productivity Commission’s inquiry ‘More Effective Social Services’ (and its submissions) should, I believe, be put back on the table as part of this inquiry. I understand that aspects of this work are seen as directly relevant and have the support of some of the relevant leading community initiatives. Note - it will be important not to merely refer back to the final report, but also to the draft report, as in my opinion it contained an extensive amount of material that is rich and relevant and would be valuable to this inquiry.¹²
- The Way Forward: An integrated system for intimate partner violence and child abuse and neglect in New Zealand¹³ proposed the establishment of a new integrated system to better address intimate partner violence and child abuse and neglect in New Zealand. It also outlined why fundamental reform and a radical new approach are required for New Zealand to achieve long term outcomes in addressing these issues.
- Using systems thinking to address intimate partner violence and child abuse in New Zealand. This 2019 New Zealand Family Violence Issues Paper that makes the case that using systems thinking is essential if we are to make significant progress in reducing intimate partner violence (IPV) and child abuse and neglect (CAN) in Aotearoa New Zealand.

⁹ [See here](#)

¹⁰ [See here](#)

¹¹ [See here](#)

¹² The draft More Effective Social Services report contains 34 mentions of disadvantage.

¹³ [See here](#)

- The Social Sector Trials¹⁴ conducted by the Ministry of Social Development to test a new approach to improving social service delivery. The approach involved focussing on a set of desired social outcomes for a target group, reorganising funding and decision-making processes across the social sector, and shifting the control of service delivery to local levels.

Where government effort should be focused

The inquiry should take it as a given that tamariki, whānau and communities would benefit from not experiencing persistent disadvantage. If the aim is to quantify those benefits, there are better methodologies for achieving this than asking a random sample of people ‘what outcomes they want for their tamariki, whānau and communities. This infers an underlying assumption that some groups should expect different, or lesser, outcomes from the rest of the population. If we accept that disadvantage equals inequality, then surely the objective in eliminating disadvantage should be to achieve equality – equality of outcomes.

Government efforts must be focused on intervening as early and as effectively as possible in the disadvantage cycle (but not at the expense of secondary or tertiary intervention). The Commission’s ‘More effective social services: Draft Report’¹⁵ (pg 49) had this to say:

Early intervention in social problems can significantly improve outcomes for individuals and the return on government expenditure. There is strong evidence for this yet the social services system focuses predominately on “fixing” problems once they have become apparent, rather than preventing them in the first place. Inquiry participants referred to this as the “ambulance at the bottom of the cliff” approach to service delivery.

Heckman (2009) used evidence from a range of sources to show that early intervention in the lives of disadvantaged children produces much higher returns on investments than waiting until problems emerge later in childhood or adolescence.

If society intervenes early enough, it can improve cognitive and socio-emotional abilities, and the health of disadvantaged children...Early interventions promote schooling, reduce crime, foster workforce productivity, and reduce teenage pregnancy...The longer society waits to intervene in the life cycle of a disadvantaged child, the more costly it is to remediate disadvantage. (p. 50)

The characteristics of effective interventions to improve outcomes for young, disadvantaged children have been known for decades.

This reinforces my recommendation that children be placed at the centre of this inquiry and in any proposed models or systems for the future. Our tamariki and rangatahi are at the earliest stages of the intergenerational cycle and it is by focusing our efforts on them that we have the most to gain as a society. According to the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy¹⁶

- Nearly a quarter of New Zealand's children and young people (up to 250,000) are growing up in households considered to be in poverty, when the cost of housing is taken into account.
- It has been estimated that an even greater number of children and young people (nearly 300,000) experience or are exposed to family and sexual violence every year.

The consultation document asks which aspects of government policy are most important to focus on and gives examples of secure housing, mental health treatment and supporting new parents. Most of the ‘aspects of disadvantage’ that I listed in an earlier section are still largely being addressed by government in silos. However, those who are disadvantaged don’t live in these silos – they don’t just

¹⁴ [See here](#)

¹⁵ [See here](#)

¹⁶ [See here](#)

have one of these experiences – many have all of them. It is time to stop putting the needs of the separate government agencies in the centre and start putting our most disadvantaged and vulnerable citizens at the centre. Until we do that little will change.

I urge the Commission to not look for individual ‘paint by numbers’ solutions that could be applied to individuals or whanau to ‘fix’ their immediate issues or design ‘solutions’ and then try and fit people into those. The inquiry must be mindful of the fact that there will be as many different solutions as there are disadvantaged individuals, whanau, and communities at disadvantage.

Instead, I urge the Commission to focus on the vision of wellbeing/waiora – what would an equitable Aotearoa society look like if all citizens were thriving. Then work back from there to design a strengths-based system that wraps around children and their whanau and does everything required to optimise their wellbeing and ensure they thrive and achieve equitable outcomes. This would require a holistic community led approach not a linear/silo, top down approach

The consultation document asks whether there are changes needed in the ways that government services are provided (and I assume planned and funded). Three examples are listed – devolving responsibility for services, joining up service provision and helping those most in need navigate the system. These are exactly the types of changes needed in a new system.

There is a growing acceptance in Aotearoa and internationally that in order to address the wicked/complex social problems plaguing New Zealand, government will need to ‘let go of the reins’ and take a more collaborative, decentralised and bottom up, rather than top down, perspective. Likewise, there is a growing acceptance that the voices and experiences of service users must be central to the system design and operation to ensure it is responsive to their need.

The Commission’s final report from the ‘More Effective Social Services’ inquiry noted that top-down initiatives and restructures tend not to work because regions, communities and subsidiary organisations vary not only in the nature of the social problems they face but also in their capabilities and perspectives. They said that many providers are attracted to the concepts of “co-production” and “co-design”, which includes wider involvement in design, governance and ongoing service management and delivery.

In the literature, the concept of bottom-up aligns closely with the concept of decentralisation – removing the top-down mechanism thereby enabling local approaches to flourish. In a report produced by the UK Institute for Public Policy Research,¹⁷ Muir and Parker advocate three steps to design and manage public services in a way that recognises they are complex systems: decentralise, pool funding and integrate.

They say that dealing with complex problems requires much greater integration of public service systems, and the fostering of deep relationships both among citizens and between service users and frontline professionals - that public management of the future is one where central government has to ‘let go’ and become an enabler rather than the manager. They say this is because complex challenges are not susceptible to standardised, one-size-fits-all blueprints; because services delivered in functional silos from Whitehall [or Wellington] are unable to get a grip on the interconnected causes of complex problems; and because greater professional autonomy is required to allow for more innovative and relational approaches at the frontline.

¹⁷ Muir, R and Parker, I. (2014), Many to Many: How the relational state will transform public services. Institute for Public Policy Research, London UK.

The Australian Public Service document 'Tackling wicked problems: A public policy perspective'¹⁸ explains why a 'bottom-up perspective' is needed:

Governments do not usually have the reach or power to direct behaviours that might conflict with local beliefs, values and private interests, even if they are sure of the right policy answer to the problem. It is unlikely that government from the centre can specify how best to provide a complex service at the local level if there is to be scope to boost service satisfaction, improve outcomes and secure local legitimacy.

I believe the single greatest barrier preventing New Zealanders from reaching their potential is apathy – not by those experiencing disadvantage, but by the rest of the population. It appears that Aotearoa has become a more and more divided – the advantaged and the disadvantaged. The advantaged seem to be almost accepting of the levels of disadvantage in society.

Perhaps the most powerful justification for this inquiry is buried on page 7 of the consultation document: 'Whenever people or collectives don't thrive all of society loses out'. The most important, and most challenging, step, will be getting the whole population to take collective responsibility for this.

¹⁸ [See here](#)

Appendix 1 – The flow on effects of violence against women and children

