



MANAAKITIA A TĀTOU TAMARIKI

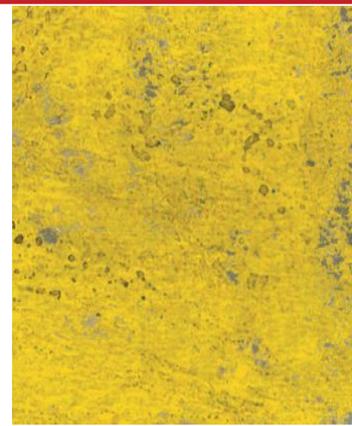
Children's
Commissioner

Being child-centred

ELEVATING CHILDREN'S INTERESTS IN THE WORK OF YOUR ORGANISATION

October 2015

Being child-centred



Being child-centred is about elevating the status of children's interests, rights, and views in the work of your organisation. It involves considering the impact of decisions and processes on children, and seeking their input when appropriate to inform your work.

CHILDREN MATTER

Children (those aged under 18) are a core part of society, making up more than a quarter of New Zealand's population. They depend on and are major users of many services, but they often have little say in the policies and services that affect them.

This paper outlines why organisations should consider the needs and voices of children, and include their point of view when developing priorities, policy, programmes and products and making decisions that affect them.

WHAT DOES BEING CHILD-CENTRED MEAN?

Being child-centred is a way of elevating the interests, wellbeing and views of children. This is important because children are affected directly, and indirectly, by practically all policy decisions, and yet children can't influence them through traditional channels. Children can't vote and they rarely respond to consultation processes such as discussion documents or calls for submissions.

Adults have to weigh up the competing interests of many groups when making decisions, and children are often neglected in the process by virtue of their silence.

The overarching reason to be child-centred is to make sure your agency's decisions do not harm children and, in fact, support them to thrive. To achieve this, you need to embed processes that support child-centred thinking in your organisation. There are also [benefits to your organisation](#) of being more child-centred, such as more effective services.

While being child-centred involves elevating the status of children in your work, it doesn't necessarily mean making children's interests paramount above all other considerations.

This will be appropriate for some organisations (i.e. those whose main purpose is to deliver support and services to children), but for others, it can simply mean considering children alongside other population groups and being explicit about how they are accounted for in your decisions. For example, we would expect:

- > an agency responsible for children's care and protection to give the interests and wellbeing of children paramount consideration in their decisions;
- > an agency responsible for a general service (i.e. public transport) to consider the needs and interests of children alongside those of other population groups (based on gender, age, disability, or ethnicity for example), as well as factors such as environmental issues or costs.

There are *few* public services or policy agencies whose work has *no* impact on children. Practically all areas have at least indirect impacts on children. If an agency considers children as a 'core client' group then they are more likely to recognise the importance of valuing children, not just as consumers, but as people with rights to have their voices heard and needs met.

A core part of being child-centred is ensuring children have a say in decisions that affect them. The Office of the Children's Commissioner has developed advice, [Listening2Kids](#), on ways that you can engage with children.



WHY TAKE A MORE CHILD-CENTRED APPROACH?

There is abundant literature outlining the benefits for local and central government agencies and businesses of taking a more child-centred approach, including New Zealand specific reports¹.

Taking a more child-centred approach has benefits for your organisation, for children themselves, and for the wider community.

You can get better, more relevant and responsive policies, services and programmes by asking children, because you gain access to their unique ideas, skills and perspectives. For this reason, there seems to be an increasing trend to consult specifically with children (or young people), particularly at local government level, on services that are targeted to children and young people.

Decisions that negatively impact on children can not only harm them, but can also result in high future costs to society. Such costs could be avoided by making

decisions that avoid any inadvertent, negative consequences on children in the first place, or by mitigating potential negative effects on children. Some organisations do child-impact assessments when beginning policy development, so they can identify and avoid where possible inadvertent negative consequences, and can increase the beneficial impacts. Another way is to have an effective feedback mechanism that children can use easily, so you can get children’s perspectives of impacts on them.

The government has a responsibility to promote child wellbeing, growth and development, as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC).

The rights of children are enshrined to ensure that children can grow and develop, do not suffer discrimination, have a say in things that affect them, and so adults consider the best interests of children when making decisions that will affect them.

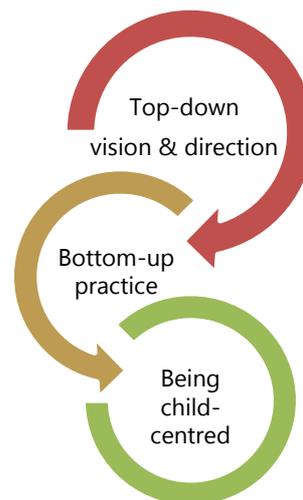
Children and young people develop a sense of inclusion, civic participation, and agency when they are provided opportunities to engage in decisions that will affect them. Listening to children and showing you have considered their views in decision making makes children feel valued. It improves their self-esteem, confidence and capability to respond to enquiries and give constructive feedback on an on-going basis.

There are also benefits in terms of shifting attitudes to children. When your organisation chooses to consider how its decisions affect children, and do so visibly, it promotes a positive attitude towards children – among staff, clients and the wider public.

Finally, children have the right to express their views freely and for their views to be given due weight; they should be provided opportunities to be heard in matters that affect them.

TWO ELEMENTS OF BEING A CHILD-CENTRED ORGANISATION

An organisation is child-centred when children are at the centre of decisions, actions, and practices that affect them. There are two necessary elements to being child-centred: top-down leadership and bottom-up practice.



An organisation’s leadership provides the top-down vision and direction to enable child-centred thinking. When leaders understand the value of promoting children’s rights and supporting children’s wellbeing, then the organisation can more easily embed child-

¹ For example, Hanna, K., Hassall, I., & Davies, E. (2006). Child impact reporting. Social Policy Journal, 29, pp32-42; also Mason, N. and Hanna, K. (2009). Undertaking child impact assessments in Aotearoa New Zealand Local Authorities: Evidence, practice, ideas.



Improving how child-centred your organisation is doesn't necessarily need to start with leadership and vision. Both leadership and practice are necessary elements and you can start with either, or develop them in tandem.

centred thinking throughout its policy and staff development processes. Having key performance indicators (KPIs) relating to the wellbeing of children demonstrates an organisation's commitment to supporting this outcome. The top-down vision and direction creates an operating environment with a commitment to the time, funding and expertise for child impact assessments, for undertaking engagement with children, and for making decisions that incorporate this additional information.

Bottom-up practice involves processes to collect and analyse information on the impacts of policy, programmes and services

on children. Engagement with children provides one key source of information – especially for decisions that directly affect them, or where services are targeted to children. Other sources may be existing reports or data about effects on children. Practice that consistently includes a children's lens may require additional staff training and commitment.

Both top-down leadership and bottom-up practice should reflect the following core principles of child-centred thinking (broadly based on the key principles of UNCROC):

- > The best interests of the child should be an important consideration in all decisions
- > Children should have the opportunity to have a say in decisions that affect them
- > Decisions should ensure that children are not discriminated against
- > Decisions should support, and not prevent, children to live, grow and achieve their full development
- > Institutionalising child-centred thinking requires adoption at all levels of the organisation, including leadership commitment, training of staff and embedding in operations
- > Any assessment of how children may be affected needs to be made at the beginning of a decision making process so issues can be addressed in the ultimate decision.

HOW TO BE MORE CHILD-CENTRED IN YOUR WORK

Whether you strive to be a fully child-centred organisation, or you simply want incorporate more consideration of the impacts on children of your work, we have provided a process to guide you.

Start by asking these four questions:

1. What impact does the decision (about a policy, programme or service) have on children?
2. What are the differential impacts (i.e. on children from different groups, or between children and other groups in society)?
3. What do children say? - Collect children's views and voices on a subject.
4. What changes could be made to enhance the outcomes for children?

1. What is the impact on children?

By reviewing the literature, talking to informed stakeholders, or undertaking a brain-storming activity, consider:

- > What impact does the decision (or lack of a decision) have on children? This may be either positive or negative.
- > Is that impact or effect going to be direct or indirect?
- > What is the nature and extent of that effect?

If *directly*, then a greater effort should go in to finding out children's perspectives – to give them a say. If *indirectly*, then the extent of positive or negative consequences should be identified. Negative impacts should be mitigated effectively. Positive impacts can be explicitly furthered by expanding certain aspects of a decision or policy.

Measuring the *extent* of impact requires analysis of available data on cause and effect, focusing on what children need for their wellbeing. The level of risk or reward, and the extent of coverage, e.g. small groups of children versus the national population, will determine how much effort should go in to designing an analysis that identifies and measures the impacts on children. If a decision is to be based on available data, it is relevant to provide data also for the counter-

factual, e.g. not making a decision, or the *status quo*. This is useful when making investment cases for programmes that will save costs that would have been incurred without them, for example preventative health care or positive parenting support to vulnerable families.

Knowing what contributes to children's wellbeing will help you determine what impacts (direct or indirect) your decisions or policies may have on children. As part of a brainstorming activity, ask how your decision will affect all of the following six areas that impact on what children need to grow up well:

- > Affordable, safe, healthy homes
- > Stable, nurturing family
- > Supportive community
- > Adequate income to meet needs
- > Supportive education sector
- > Accessible health services

More details on these six areas of need are available on the Office of the Children's Commissioner's [Giving2Kids](#) web pages.

Some countries undertake 'child impact assessments' which are systematic ways to ensure that the full range of children's rights are considered in decision making.

New Zealand's Ministry of Social Development is developing advice on how to determine impacts on children as part of its 2015-16 UNCROC work programme. It will be available on their website in 2016, www.msd.govt.nz. This will be guidance aimed at government agencies whose policies and services are targeted towards children. It is expected the advice will be adaptable for many organisations.

2. What are the differential impacts?

Your policy or decision may have differential impacts on different groups of children. Consider differences among:

- > ages (e.g. younger versus older children)
- > ethnicities
- > socioeconomic groups
- > disabilities
- > communities or regions (e.g. urban or rural)
- > family size and structure

- > parental characteristics (e.g. parent in prison, on minimum wage, with disability).

Also consider when there are differences between children and other groups in society.

To answer this, you may undertake a review of statistical information available to compare across different groups. You can often use existing sources of data and reduce the need for new research. In New Zealand, Statistics New Zealand provides services to help use official statistics, and many agencies have sector-specific data on their websites, e.g. [Education](#) or [Health](#). Alternatively, you might review available literature or talk to informed stakeholders or topic experts about differential impacts.

3. What do children say?

Collect children's voices on the subject of your decision making and enable their participation. The Office of the Children's Commissioner's [Listening2Kids](#) web pages provide advice and support on how to plan and implement engagement with children.

You can seek children's views and input to:

- > Inform your strategic directions and priorities
- > Support improved policy, programme or service design
- > Gather feedback on an existing policy, programme or service (through an engagement process or an effective complaints system)
- > Incorporate into evaluation or monitoring activities of programmes or services.

Importantly, after engaging with children, ensure their opinions and views are taken into account in decision making.

Finally, feed back to participants to let them know what happened as a result of their involvement.



4. What changes could be made to enhance the outcomes for children?

Use the information you have gathered about the impact on children of your decision, including views of children themselves, to consider if any changes could be made to enhance the outcomes for children.

When you identify potential negative impacts from a decision or policy, it is important to mitigate them. On occasions, there will be both positive and negative impacts, so the latter needs to be mitigated or weighted up against the former to ensure net benefits of the decision or policy – particularly those that address disadvantage. For example, you may decide it is appropriate to end a scholarship programme that supports high-achieving students and, rather, use funds for additional tutoring for a particular segment of students not achieving at the national standard.

Some groups need special attention, e.g. families with younger children suffer higher rates of poverty than those with older children. Therefore, greater support needs to be targeted specifically for younger children to mitigate the negative effects of poverty.

Another consideration when targeting assistance to a particular group, is whether the intended users are likely to feel any stigma in using that service. Children can be particularly sensitive to being stigmatised.

Using existing tools and frameworks can help you consider options that would enhance outcomes for children alongside other imperatives. Some New Zealand examples include:

- > [Living Standards Framework](#)
- > [Regulatory Impact Analysis Handbook](#)
- > [Cost Opportunity Benefit Risk Analysis \(Cobra\) Policy Guide](#)

Also, look for the guideline from the Ministry of Social Development on determining impacts on children: www.msd.govt.nz.

CONCLUSION

Being fully child-centred is an aspiration, and few organisations will ever completely achieve this. However, all organisations can make better policies, programmes and decisions by simply elevating the interests of children and taking the time to consider them alongside other factors.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) positions children as rights holders. As a signatory to UNCROC, New Zealand has committed to ensuring our children have their rights upheld.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner seeks to encourage all organisations to be more child-centred and to respect the rights of children.

