



## **Key thinking on social issues: solutions-focused, innovative, high trust and family-centred**

### ***Early themes from the Families Commission's 50 Key Thinkers forum***

***“There is nothing wrong with New Zealand that cannot be rectified by using what is right with New Zealand”.***

If there was one phrase that summed up the Families Commission's 50 Key Thinkers forum in Wellington on 11 May, 2011, it would be the above sentence.

Yes, it was about brave new ideas to long term and deep seated social issues.

Yes, it was about not doing the same old thing over and over again but expecting different results – an accusation levelled at much of the current system.

But above all, it was about recognising that the ideas, resources, solutions and innovations to effectively support the wellbeing of families and whānau in New Zealand already exist. “We're doing everything right, somewhere, just not everywhere.”

It was, in many ways, a forum on a topic whose time has come. There was an energy and a willingness to be involved which suggested that thinking along these lines had reached a critical mass and that the forum could well prove to be a catalyst for driving it forward into the next stage.

It challenged, and answered, the question of how does this nation break the mould of family services 'doing to' people, and start bringing in cooperative partnerships between government, communities and families themselves to 'do with'.

It was about recognising that most families and whānau have the desire and the resources to succeed and do well, socially, economically, culturally and in health; but, when they need help, it must be appropriate, targeted, meet their whole needs not just one problem, and, above all, that it be a process that works with them, not imposed on them.

More than 50 of this country's leading innovators, entrepreneurs, family service providers, and community organisers met at Wellington's new Wharewaka to discuss these issues. They began the day by listening to the challenge laid out before them by Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister the Right Honourable Bill English, and ended it with a commitment to collaborative, family or whānau-focused, community driven approach, sustainable over the long term, from Hon Paula Bennett, Minister for Social Development and Employment.

But it was the in-between debate that produced the gold as the key thinkers grappled with issues and solutions close to their hearts and their experiences, and responded to the challenge to come up with some constructive, real, future-focused solutions that will ensure effective support for families and whānau in New Zealand, now and for the future.

It was a big day – too big to analyse thoroughly less than 24 hours after the forum concluded, but the following are common themes that emerged; themes that the Families Commission will now analyse in detail to write a report for the Minister and participants. That report will identify further steps we take together to put into action the lessons we have learned about how we move into a new way of thinking about, and delivering support for, the wellbeing of families and whānau in New Zealand.

## **A distinct switch in the way that families are supported**

The old approach to social services for individuals and families was to identify a specific problem and try to fix it. Narrow approaches to family services often only addressed the symptoms rather than the causes. And a number of agencies might have been involved with a single family, all addressing different symptoms.

Governments and social service agencies recognise this approach as ineffective and outmoded. The past decade has seen the growth of the wrap-around approaches to family services – one-stop shops for families so they don't have to be involved with multiple agencies and tell their stories multiple times.

But the funding and collaboration systems among government agencies have struggled to catch up with this new approach, and vestiges of the old approach are seen everywhere and are, in some cases, stifling innovation and change.

The forum concluded that the new approach is good, but we need to go much further. We need to revise our attitude to families in a fundamental way. Families and communities should be seen as the solution to issues. Families can be empowered to help themselves. Families do best when supported primarily by extended family and whānau, and by the community. Through this process they can be assisted to understand their issues, and to see the strengths they already have to address them. The community provides additional support if needed.

This requires a rethink by government and social service agencies. One role for government can be to encourage and enable communities to grow and become independent; perhaps funded by government for some programmes but making their own decisions as to where and how that money should be spent. Families and communities can be seen as the social infrastructure of this country, equivalent to the roading and broadband infrastructure. Investment in social infrastructure will reap economic benefits, not just social benefits.

Too many families and communities have learned to be dependent, to turn to government and agency support, and they need to unlearn this. The Government can help in this process. The Government can continue to have overall responsibility for ensuring that the system works, that families are indeed supported, that children are cared for. The Government can also make sure that the agency and specialist services that families sometimes need are available, and that there is a basket of knowledge about what works for families and communities to draw upon to apply in their own areas.

When social service agencies are needed, their role can be to assist families to grow stronger, and address their own issues. This means working alongside families providing advice and support, while the families work through their issues. This work can be demanding, and agency staff need the right skills to work with families in this way.

These changes cannot happen overnight. The process has to be gradual. The Government has a role in shepherding it through, and providing back-up so that families do not fall through the cracks along the way.

### **Develop trust, relationships, and collaboration**

Community, agencies, and the Government need to develop better trust, relationships and collaboration, at and between all levels. When you have trust and good relationships, you get innovation – without trust you get nowhere. Communities need to discuss issues internally, and then with other communities. Learning takes place this way, and ideas are generated. Similarly for agencies. Government has a role in fostering this. Māori are used to working in collaborative ways, and have models others can adapt.

Participants praised moves by the Government to give more responsibility to the community, and to reduce bureaucratic complications, especially through Whānau Ora, the High Trust Contracting Model, and the Community Response Model. They saw Whānau Ora as a platform for moving in the direction of empowering the community. They were confused, however, about how far these initiatives have got, how much funding was involved, and what the next steps are. They still see examples of a silo mentality within government and in some departments or branches.

### **Reduce funding complexities**

Generally, participants accepted the message that there is no new money for family social services. But they agreed existing money can be used more effectively. They want funding to be switched to those programmes that are proven effective. And, long-term, they want the need for government assistance to be reduced, as a result of enabling families and communities to be self-supporting.

Meanwhile, however, they asked that the Government find a way to ease current funding complexities. There are many sources of money among Government agencies, let alone philanthropic, community, and corporate trusts. Some participants were not aware of all these funding sources. A further difficulty is that funding from some government sources can come with restrictions on it, which do not allow agencies to work with families in flexible ways. The participants supported further development of funding relationships built on trust that allow them to provide the support that families need.

### **Funding innovation**

A number of participants talked about developing and funding innovative services. Their advice was to be bold. If you have got a great idea, pursue it. Design services around the needs of families, not with the aim of producing a service that fits the criteria of funding sources. If the innovation is exciting, and the design solid, you will find funding, but you have to be prepared to go beyond the usual funding sources and directly approach businesses.

### **A focus on families and children**

Participants voiced differing views of whether the primary focus should be on children, or families. They resolved this by concluding there should be a focus on strengthening families, but there should equally be no compromise on protecting the wellbeing of children.

## Going local

This was a theme with three parts.

Participants wanted to have the opportunity to discuss the issues raised at the forum at the regional level. These discussions need to include corporations and iwi.

Other discussions should take place at a district level, and include local businesses and iwi. These discussions would be a fundamental building block to developing innovative local initiatives.

Communities should discuss community-level issues. The Government can foster an environment which enables these conversations.

The Families Commission has a brokering or facilitating role in all of these.

## The role of the Families Commission

The forum identified a number of ways that the Commission can help:

- Provide information on innovations, best practice and effective programmes as a tool for families, communities and agencies.
- Identify and plug information gaps.
- Facilitate regional forums to take the discussion we had on 11 May to communities everywhere. Facilitation of such discussions was seen, in itself, as a catalyst facilitating change for the better.