

5. FOCUS ON THE FUTURE – AN AGENDA FOR CHILDREN

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Corporate Plan Output: Children's Strategy	

The purpose of this report is to inform the Community Services Committee about the proposed National Agenda and Policy for Children.

BACKGROUND

In 1999 a submission was made to the Ministry of Social Policy by the Children's Advocate concerning the need for a national policy and strategy for New Zealand's children. Numerous advocacy groups have also joined together to impress this need upon the Ministry of Social Services.

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38 people working in the area of children's issues were invited to the Beehive to participate in launching the development of an agenda for children. Once completed, this will provide a framework for policy development and research for people under 18 for the next five years. The seminar aimed to provide the first major step in continuing consultation with the non-government sector on children's issues. A reference group will be formed to assist the Ministry of Social Policy and Ministry of Youth Affairs to develop the agenda and provide ongoing input into policy development relating to children. Numerous Government Ministers were present to signal their interest.

CHILD POPULATION TRENDS

Currently there are just over one million children under 18 years in New Zealand – 27% of the population. This is projected to fall to 22% over the next 15 years. By 2010 about half of New Zealand's under five year olds will be able to identify with an ethnic group other than European. By 2016 this will be half of all children under 18. Many will have multiple cultural heritages. Over the decade to 2010, it is predicted that the number of children aged less than ten will decline, and the number of 10-17 year olds will increase. The increase in older children will be more pronounced in percentage terms among Maori and Pacific Island peoples.

Currently more than three –quarters of children in NZ live in two parent families. The proportion of children living with one parent has increased sharply between 1986 and 1996, particularly among Maori and Pacific Island children.

According to the Ministry of Social Services the proportion of children living in poverty is a major concern with serious implications for our society both now and in the future. He stated that robust policies need to be put in place that support and foster the ability of families and communities to nurture their children to responsible adulthood.

ISSUES

Discussion papers prepared by Government agencies put forward their views on key issues that children face now and will face in the immediate future. These papers are available from the Children's Advocate, Lyn Campbell. Commentators highlighted additional issues and questions as follows:

1. Is the Children's Policy to be a broad, over-arching umbrella policy which will lead to an audit of existing policies. (One health expert dumped 75kgs of current policy documents on the table, stating that most government reports/strategies go into a 'chasm' and fall short on implementation).
2. Pilots fail to grasp the whole problem and express fully the size of the challenge.
3. Treasury needs to be part of the debate.
4. Serious co-ordination problems exist between Education, Health, Welfare, Government and Non-Government Organisations.
5. There are too many 'gate-keepers' in systems which are failing, and a culture of abdication.
6. Funding of iwi directly from Government so that they can provide local solutions to local problems within the context of whanau, hapu and iwi.
7. Is consultation about 'informing' or conceptualisation?
8. Primary caregivers must have resources to do the job well. (eg in cases where non-custodial parent has high income).
9. UNCROC (United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child) and Treaty of Waitangi – how should they mesh in child policy?
10. Local Government core responsibilities in terms of the welfare and wellbeing of children and families in their communities.
11. Giving children 'a voice' and ensuring their perspectives and views are heard.

Many other issues emerged, underlining the complexity of the task of ensuring that this process of developing an agenda for children, results in effective implementation of relevant policies.

CONCLUSION

My impression was that amongst the many experts gathered together by the Ministers of Social Services and Youth Affairs, there was little understanding of how effectively local government can be involved in the implementation of Children's Policy in their local community. While the move to develop a National Agenda and Policy for Children is long overdue, its effectiveness will be limited unless there is local 'ownership' and implementation by local communities. It would seem that Local Government has a key role to play as one of these players which holds a number of the pieces of the jigsaw. Central Government cannot implement solutions without effective partnerships in strategically implementing policies for children.

- Recommendation:**
1. That the information be received.
 2. That the Community Services Committee endorse the development of a national agenda and policy for children.

Chairman's

Recommendation: That the Council continue to advocate for an effective national children's agenda and policy.