



**National Council of
Women of New Zealand**

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Submission to the Productivity Commission on the Issues Paper: More Effective Social Services

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella group representing 288 organisations affiliated at either the national level or to one of our 21 branches. In addition to our organisational membership, about 260 women are individual members of branches.

NCWNZ's function is to represent and promote the interests of New Zealand women through research, discussion and action. This submission has been prepared by the NCWNZ Social Issues Standing Committee after consultation with the membership of NCWNZ.

Introduction

NCWNZ welcomes the opportunity to comment on this Issues Paper. Social services are largely organised and delivered by women. Front-line staff and volunteers are mostly women, and a majority of the most vulnerable recipients of services are also women or their children. It is no surprise that the topic is of deep interest and concern to NCWNZ members.

This submission will not attempt to answer specific questions posed by the Issues Paper, but will rather summarise the knowledge and experience of responding members. Comment will centre on decision-making and community input, funding competition and insecurity, accountability and reporting, flexibility and integration of services, cultural and regional diversity and choice, private providers and the internal culture of Government agencies.

Who should make the decisions?

Most respondents said local communities and clients should have an input to the designing, commissioning and funding of social services. Many felt that services were too often designed as 'one size fits all' to save money, and local communities and their unique needs were not taken into account. A few respondents recognised the difficulty of gathering community opinion, but overall the feeling was that service delivery would be more effective with this level of consultation.

Many respondents also saw centralised decision-making as too often disadvantaging to isolated, smaller or rural regions. Members felt cultural and regional needs were not well enough considered, especially in rural areas. Some understand that the culture of delivery is changing, but providers at community level still face a silo mode of operating, driven by their contractual obligations.

Funding security encourages innovation

Many members saw both adequate funding and good communication as essential to the success of on-the-ground social initiatives. It was suggested that local innovations be funded as pilot schemes, and if successful, rolled out and adapted to other communities across the country.

Members recognised the importance of close monitoring and good supervision of new ideas, which should nevertheless be supported and encouraged. Some felt local councils could play a role, as governing bodies who had first-hand knowledge of their communities. One respondent called for publicly funded NGOs to provide innovation, programmes and services for a particular community need.

One respondent said “You can’t get innovation if you’re not allowed to fail”. Funding insecurity and short-term funding impacts on the quality of social services. Members reported that agencies found it difficult to attract qualified staff when insecure funding meant they couldn’t offer stable employment. Simply maintaining an adequate level of service was a challenge. Experimenting with new ways of working requires extra systems of recording and evaluation, which limited funding doesn’t allow most providers.

Measure outcomes rather than outputs

Members recognised the need for accountability and accurate reporting when it comes to spending taxpayer money. The majority felt that outcomes gave the most valuable information. Measuring output – the number of visits, pamphlets produced, talks given – does not evaluate the success of a service. A majority saw client feedback, where it could reasonably be gathered, would also be of value, along with responses from the widest possible variety of other involved groups.

Reporting requirements were an issue for many respondents. They felt that too much time was wasted filling in forms while the real, often urgent work of a service had to wait. Some members reported instances of rushed or skewed reporting by agencies to secure the next round of funding. Many felt that reporting should benefit the organisation as well as the funding body, so improvements can be made if necessary. Some called for reporting requirements to be more adequately factored into funding and staffing.

More co-operation and flexibility, better outcomes

Funding and the competition for it informed a large majority of responses. As mentioned, many members reported the difficulties of delivering adequate services when so much time was spent applying for and reporting on funding. They also saw a fragmentation of services when each service was necessarily defensive of its 'patch'. Some members were frustrated by the narrow contractual obligations of larger organisations that mean many people in need don't fit their criteria.

Most respondents saw the value and importance of co-operation, but the competition for funding often prevented that, to the detriment of clients. Although some of our members regard competition for funding as a given, many more do not. They see it leading to an inefficient use of limited resources. Respondents pointed out that although providers try to create wrap-around services through co-operation, they still struggle with the silos of activity that prevent true integration.

However, respondents reported many organisations that saw co-operation as a priority, including Presbyterian Support, Salvation Army, Life Wise Mission, SPACE (Supporting Parents Alongside Children's Education), St Vincent de Paul, Nelson Tasman Housing Trust, Church Helping Agencies Group Dunedin, Franklin Family Support Services and Fifeshire Foundation. Whanau Ora, Family Start, Hospice with District Nurses, early childhood centres and schools – all are examples of effective co-operation for the benefit of clients and communities.

Technology for better data collection, sharing and privacy

There has been caution over data-sharing, and concerns about client privacy. Some respondents recognised that better data-sharing may have better outcomes for clients. Improved technology at all levels can create an integrated system of information collection and storage, which will translate to better access. Checks need to be included to provide a balance between protecting clients' privacy and making key information available for more efficient service. Time-wasting duplications and errors will be reduced, and providers will more easily deal with clients when case histories are accessible.

Provider diversity and client choice

Members reported that a broad choice of providers in more populated areas meant that language, ethnic and cultural barriers could be overcome for some communities. However, some also felt that the Government was slow to respond to changing needs – community organisations don't have the resources to launch new initiatives. Economic as well as cultural diversity are not taken enough into account, even within one region. Another disadvantage occurs when a few larger organisations are contracted nationally, and proceed to cherry-pick contracts. The remaining areas may be left to subcontractors who are poorly resourced and reviewed.

In smaller communities, client choice is limited, and in rural areas clients must travel long distances to access services. Some members called for funding for travel or digital communication, for clients or provider, to give everyone equal access to services. Many small communities already have volunteer-run shuttles to larger centres, supported by government agencies such as DHBs. Lack of choice can drive needy clients into unlawful actions, some respondents warned.

Funding insecurity can also affect provider diversity. One member pointed out that contract prices for some providers were set seven years ago, and have not been increased, even in response to inflation. Not-for-profit providers are significantly affected as staffing and other infrastructure costs rise. Some have had to close, reducing client choice still further.

Mixed feelings about private providers

After the issue of funding, private providers was a topic that drew a considerable and varied response from members. Some respondents held that private providers have greater financial stability due to other business income, sometimes providing a service where there is none (e.g. taxis for people who have no transport), and offering a service with more add-ons to those who can afford it. Other members stated categorically that there is no room for profit-making from our most needy and vulnerable citizens.

A case in point is the rest-home industry, where some private providers pay shareholders but offer low wages to workers and sometimes bare minimum care for residents. Members felt that any Government subsidy should be ring-fenced to benefit workers and residents, and not shareholders. One member pointed out that ACC provides a social service but behaves like a profit-making company. Another suggested that powerful industries should have a component of social service to mitigate the damage they cause – casinos, breweries, packaged food manufacturers and tobacco companies, for instance.

Internal culture of Government agencies

Coming through clearly in the responses to this Issues Paper is a report of the frustration people feel when dealing with Government agencies such as Work and Income, or Child Youth and Family. The staff of these agencies are under political pressure to create outcomes that improve the bottom line, which too often results in arbitrary treatment rather than listening to needs. It is reported that people are bullied and threatened, treated like second-class citizens, made to attend sometimes pointless work-ready courses and apply for low-paid or inappropriate jobs – or be cut off.

Alongside the overarching review of social services, members are calling for a change of culture within these Government agencies. It is too easy to see all beneficiaries as rorting the system, when most are genuinely struggling and in need of support. It's a situation exacerbated by the recent shootings, which has put more pressure and fear on all concerned.

Conclusion

Contributors to this submission have a range of social service experience, some as part of the service provider industry, and others as clients or family and friends of clients. Although a concern of the Issue Paper is the political fall-out when a glaring social service failure hits the media, it is a general consensus of NCWNZ membership that funding is the key.

Adequate funding, followed closely by a more collegial alliance model of provision, will go a long way to reducing social service failures, to filling gaps and to caring for our most vulnerable people. The alliance model will need better communication and consultation strategies, a stronger focus on the needs of real people rather than the balance sheet, and a revisit of our less than progressive tax system so that the most well-off pay their fair share to fund improved services.

NCWNZ looks forward to a healthier, more caring society when these changes are implemented, and appreciates the opportunity to comment on this issue.

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