

Building family resilience and wellbeing

How can we create a social service model to break intergenerational cycles of poverty?

By Anne Molineux & Adithi Pandit

The current system of social service delivery in New Zealand is fragmented, complex and difficult to navigate.

Despite this, the majority of kiwi families, whose lives are stable and secure, are able to meet their needs within the structures of the current system. For a small, yet significant minority of families that are at risk or in crisis – and who typically have the greatest need for our social services – the current system is difficult to navigate, and fails to take a holistic view of the family and their complex needs, beyond what they may require as individuals. These are often the same families who in many cases have been experiencing

poor life outcomes for generations, with colonisation, displacement and systemic bias having a compounding role. These families struggle to have their needs met within the current system – perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty and societal disadvantage and exclusion.

In 2018 we published an article as part of our State of the State research series – [Building New Zealand's social capital: a family-by-family approach](#) – in which we explored the limitations of the current

system, and identified three possible social service models for families at risk or in crisis:

01. **Navigator-style models** like Whānau Ora and the Family-by-Family approach described in our first article - are typically characterised by a role (the navigator) who acts with and on behalf of families to enable them to access the right services and supports in a manner that is aligned to their needs



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02. **A Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI)** would streamline the myriad benefits and entitlements that exist today (from superannuation to disability support) with a means-tested income supplement for all families whose income falls below an identified threshold

03. **Whānau-centred policy**, making the most of community-led development approaches that invest early and build resilience and social capital in whānau

We have since interviewed leaders across the social sector about these models; to test our initial hypotheses on what might work in New Zealand, learn more on what is

already working, and assess the challenges and barriers that need to be addressed.

The social sector leaders we spoke with were generous with their time and their insights. They came from large social service agencies, NGOs and grassroots community organisations, advocacy groups and corporates looking to make a social contribution. We asked the leaders about the three models overall, their relative 'readiness to implement', and ability to give effect to transformational change for whānau.

There was consensus that navigator models are an effective tool – albeit an interim solution to a systemic issue.

Leaders raised concern about the number of different navigator models established across government agencies, and the need for a single, cohesive navigator model.

Attributes for a successful social services model

From the discussions, we have developed a set of attributes key to the success of a cohesive model – many of which are not evident in the navigator models currently operating in New Zealand:



The model must be targeted to those families most in crisis – it is not a solution for all families, and the purpose of the model should be to support self determination



The navigator must be someone from the same community, with the mana to take on a coaching role with the whānau



A single holistic assessment of strengths and needs, including all domains of wellbeing, needs and aspirations



A single plan that is owned by the family and reflects their aspirations in their own words, with a budget for services and supports associated with it



Purchasing power vested in the navigator, with the ability to purchase both government and non-government services



Navigator has direct and preferential access into government agencies, and the power to stop, start and continue services for the family



Navigator has access to networks of influential advocates – leaders in commerce, politics and government who can use their privilege on behalf of the family

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Since we spoke with these leaders, the Whānau Ora Review Report has been released, in which the Panel notes the potential for whānau-centred approaches to be applied more widely across government.

There was cautious support for a guaranteed minimum income (GMI) among those we spoke with. While a Universal Basic Income (UBI) was generally seen as unaffordable and unrealistic in the medium term, the main opportunity with a GMI would be to vastly simplify the eligibility and entitlement rules across multiple current benefits, and create greater dignity through use of income as opposed to benefits. It was acknowledged that in the longer term, universal approaches are likely to be increasingly required as the future of work changes the nature of employment. The New Zealand Superannuation was raised multiple times as an example of an existing universal income approach – albeit under its own cloud of affordability concerns.

The consensus was that a GMI on its own is not a solution. There was discussion on the role of income type supports for families who have ongoing challenges with budgeting and planning, low financial

literacy, or are more vulnerable to unscrupulous lending institutions. For Pacific families in particular, the obligation to provide wider family support including to the church and back to the islands, can make an income-based support ineffective in changing fundamental needs within a family unit – and in fact may leave them worse off if other supports are reduced. For a GMI to be successful, there would need to be strong coaching and capability building for families to strengthen financial decision making capability, and to identify the right blend of direct services vs. cash transfers.

The leaders were universally supportive of whānau based policy and community-led development approaches, and agree this should be a key focus. However, there was little clarity on the roadmap for progressing community-led development, where this activity would be located in the sector, or the mechanisms for tracking success over an inter-generational time span. We left with the impression that while community-led approaches are the desired approach, they do not mesh with existing government cycles of business cases, budgets, funding, output reporting and accountability.

Bright spots for positive change



Many leaders gave us examples of activities across the social sector that are achieving meaningful, positive change for families at risk or in crisis, including Manaaki Tairāwhiti's Fifty Families initiative, Wesley Community Action's community development initiatives and the many individual staff members within agencies who work tirelessly on a daily basis to support families in their communities.

The leaders we spoke to were unanimous that success happens in spite of the current system settings – not because of them. The current system is structured in such a way as to concentrate power, resources and accountabilities within organisational silos that are removed from communities. Whether a family has someone they trust working with them in a coaching role – and conversely, not multiple people all trying to coach them – is a case of luck rather than design.

These bright spots were generally:



Led locally

Either by strong frontline staff within an agency, or by someone outside the government structure advocating on behalf of community



Involves collaboration across multiple agencies

That has arisen through local relationship building, not paper agreements

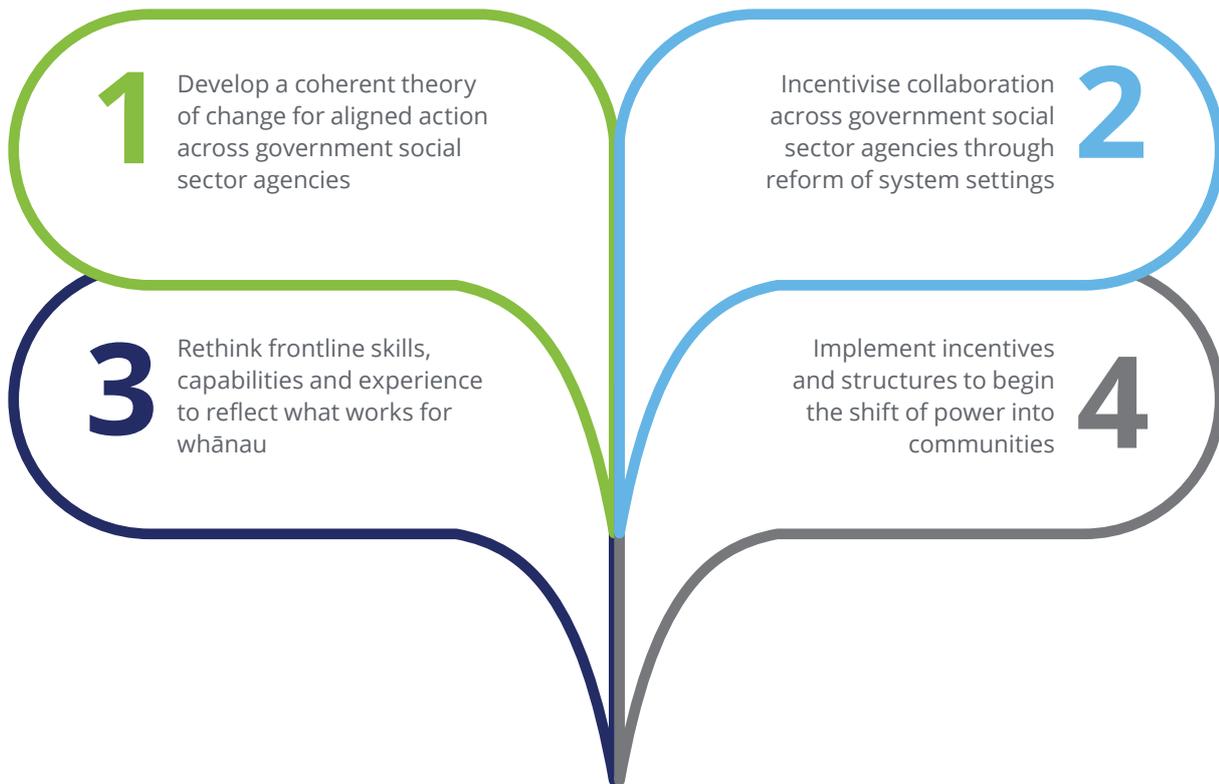


Trust based

Individuals who the community and whānau trust have taken it upon themselves to work in a coaching role

The four areas of opportunity

Based on the discussions with social sector leaders across all models, we have identified four areas of opportunity to scale and systematise success:



1 | A coherent theory of change for aligned action across government social sector agencies

A theory of change describes the problem or the opportunity, how to address the opportunity, the actions that could be taken and how we will know if we are successful.

The current system lacks a common voice and joined-up view for how wellbeing is created for whānau and community across the sector. Multiple theories of change across different agencies – some of which are documented, many of which are implied within KPIs and the service approach taken by the agency drive a fragmented approach. Greater consensus – or at least

understanding – across the sector would enhance the effectiveness of action.

Even among the leaders we spoke with, the view of what works to enhance wellbeing – income or a navigator model or community-led development – depended on the individual's opinion rather than a shared sector view. The relative priority of different outcomes and initiatives is often weighted by the life experience and world view of individuals, leaders or at best agency practice frameworks.. At a government level, everything is deemed as important.

“In the 90s/2000s there was a lot of talk about having 6 cars in the driveway – we must improve the way we deliver otherwise there will still be 6 cars up the driveway but they'll all be navigators with different theories of change and KPIs”



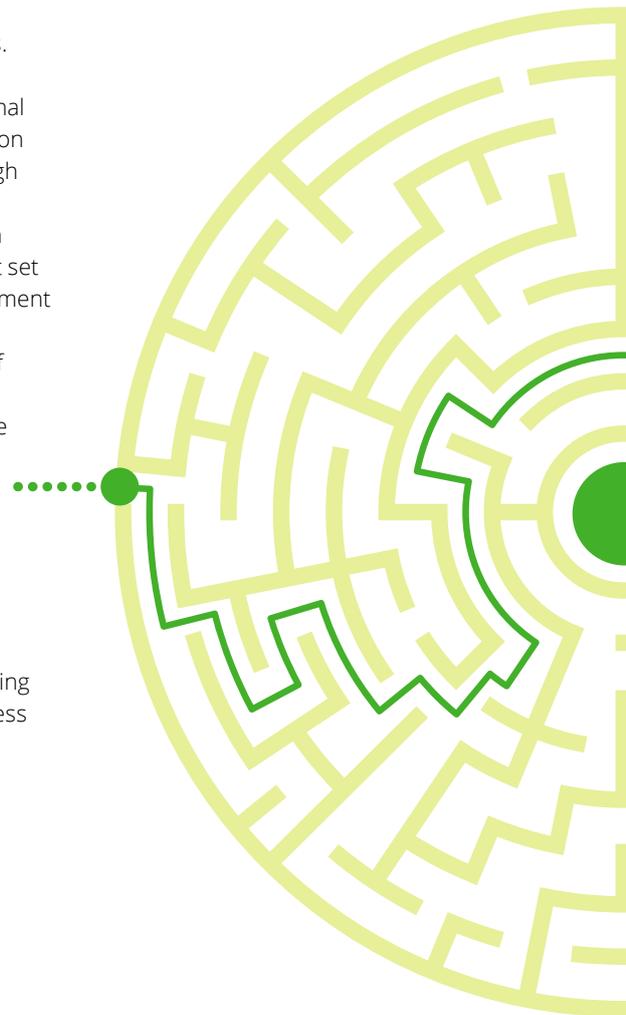
For an individual or family, this can be very confusing. The same person may need to present as strong to Oranga Tamariki so they are seen as capable of caring for their children, while also needing to present as weak and incapable to MSD in order to secure ongoing benefit entitlements. We heard numerous examples of agencies' expectations of families being impossible to meet simultaneously – and families who spend their lives running from one social service appointment to another, to the point that scheduling their social service providers becomes a fulltime job. A family who the Ministry of Education is working with on truancy may find it impossible to meet the Ministry's school attendance expectations while another family member is undertaking a drug and alcohol programme for MSD, leaving the school-age child as the only viable babysitter in the house.

A common theory of change across government that aligns to the Living Standards Framework would ensure all agencies working with families have a common understanding of what is important to address and in what sequence, and support agencies to take a more holistic view of a family's service needs and how they should best be met – taking away the need for families to present differently to different agencies. The logical additional step would be to articulate this for an individual

family at risk or in crisis in a single plan that that reflects their aspirations in their own words and spans their involvement with social sector services.

Linking these indicators to organisational KPIs would support greater collaboration between government agencies. Through our interviews, we heard challenges in collaborating across government when each agency is measured by a different set of KPIs. A common outcomes measurement framework across government would provide agencies with a common set of incentives, in turn incentivising greater collaboration and innovation to achieve community wellbeing outcomes.

A common theory of change would also support the government to take a holistic view of social sector service provision as it aligns to the Living Standards Framework, and identify where best to invest to improve wellbeing outcomes. The Wellbeing Budget process provides an opportunity to do this in a systemic way, as the methodology is developed to tackle core investments.



2 | System settings that incentivise collaboration across government social sector agencies

“There are some places where people with goodwill are making a bad system work – people who get things done, who know each other and will ignore some of their internal rules.”

The structure of the current system – with an accountability and appropriation structure that defines the mandate of each government agency – minimises accountability for the wellbeing outcomes of individual families, and acts as a disincentive to collaboration between government social sector agencies.

We heard from multiple leaders of the importance of power within the current system. One Leader gave the example of being able to ring up a frontline staff member from another social sector agency, and because she had the “right” job title, was able to secure immediate assistance for the client on whose behalf she was calling. Yet a call to a frontline staff member in her own agency with a similar request was given no weight at all. At a leadership level, we have seen examples of cross-Sector “best endeavours” CE working groups – without the power to make decisions outside their own agency mandate and the KPIs they are accountable for.

For those outside government, the government accountability structure makes it difficult to hold government to account for population wellbeing outcomes, except at the highest level. There is no ability

to fund services for clients where these do not fall within the remit of an agency. One example we were given was a family engaged with multiple agencies, none of whom could pay for flea treatment; the key barrier to school attendance and workforce participation. Non-governmental agencies find it difficult or impossible to obtain funding for community wellbeing initiatives that do not align nicely to organisational boundaries.

As a result, much of the collaboration we see within the current system occurs in spite of current system settings, not because of them. Formal collaboration tends to be incremental and at the edges, rather than challenging the core budgets of agencies. Informal collaboration is based on individual relationships, and often requires breaking an agency’s rules. In an internal study into the underlying characteristics of its highest performing frontline staff, one social sector agency found that the ability to navigate internal systems was a key indicator of ability to achieve positive outcomes for their clients.

There are steps that can be taken to make it easier for families and staff to navigate the current system within organisational silos. This could include:

- The role of a navigator for at families at risk and in crisis who are engaged with multiple social service providers
- Physical co-location of services in communities
- Recognising the particular skill involved in navigating internal systems, and providing coaching and support to staff to improve this skill

- Simplifying entitlements through mechanisms like a guaranteed minimum income to reduce the likelihood of service gaps and the need for families to navigate multiple agencies’ eligibility criteria

Many of these initiatives already exist in pockets throughout the country, but do not address the underlying structural causes of division within the current system.

There is a clear need to reform system settings and choose new structures that not only enable, but incentivise and reward collaboration across government in a way that reaches the core of agency service provision and budgets and doesn’t merely tinker at the edges.

This could include changes to accountability structures – including Ministerial accountability for population wellbeing outcomes and a clear cross-agency mandate for social sector reform. It could also include new organising structures such as ‘mutuals’ that integrate services across traditional budgetary boundaries and give autonomy to place based leaders to manage the mix of services with their communities.

There is also a fundamental need for activated leadership and change making across the sector – recognising and rewarding the capabilities and orientation of leaders who not only work beyond the system, but are also willing to change the system to be better aligned. These leaders exist in the public service and outside of it, but these leaders need to operate as a collective to make the big changes required.

3 | Rethinking frontline service provision

“Interesting things happen when people help each other because they care as opposed to being paid to care.”

The current approach to social service provision is one of service delivery in response to customer needs. Much like hiring a plumber – a problem is identified, the service provider is engaged and provides a service to a prescribed level of quality, and the problem is fixed. There is minimal emphasis placed on the ongoing relationship and trust between service provider and client.

However, this traditional service delivery model is insufficient to meet the needs and achieve the wellbeing goals for families that are at risk or in crisis. For these families, their wellbeing needs are typically so complex and interrelated that a series of point-to-point solutions are insufficient to achieve meaningful outcomes. They are often unable to accurately identify and advocate for the support they require.

The social sector leaders we spoke with emphasised the importance for families at risk or in crisis to have someone they trust working with them in a coaching role. One example we were given was of a social sector worker working with a family in which one of the children was experiencing learning difficulties in school. Instead of taking on an advocate role for the family, the worker instead worked with the parents to build their confidence in speaking up for themselves. While it took longer to attain the learning support required for the child, at the end of this process the family felt empowered and able to advocate for their own needs in other domains of their life.

A study done by one social sector agency found that the single most important factor in determining the outcomes for clients was the case worker who was

assigned to them - whether they had an orientation “compassion or compliance”. The compassionate case worker was more successful in negotiating services, bending rules to meet needs, and also exercising ‘tough love’ in encouraging and nudging the client towards new opportunities and improvements.

Non-governmental organisations and iwi providers in particular are immersed in this approach already. Going beyond the case worker example, they see the individual as part of whānau and community, walk alongside them in terms of strength and darkness, and recognise past context and future potential. Much of the relationship building work is “under the surface” so results may take years to be observed, but are more sustained and sustainable when achieved.

Such a way of working would represent a significant shift for government, from a service delivery model to a relationship-based model. Because a key attribute of the “coach” role is to be trusted by the family, this would necessitate a different relationship for government with communities – seeking out those who are

known to and already have a relationship of trust with the family, and then supporting them in their coaching role. The role of frontline staff could continue as one of service provision – and support to those acting in coaching roles.

A relationship-based model such as this would be a key enabler for more permissive service delivery settings, like a guaranteed minimum income. If there can be assurance that someone is working with the family to address, for example, poor financial decision making – more permissive service settings become more attractive and viable.



4 | Incentives and structures to support a shift of power into communities

“We can survive independently of each other but it takes a village to raise a child. You can’t take the child out of the village. We need to enable the village to be self-empowered.”

The social sector leaders we spoke with were unanimous in their support for community-led approaches to enhancing wellbeing. Shifting power into Māori communities in particular was seen as a tangible way of the government honouring its obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Many of the barriers that hinder this currently are the same barriers that hinder collaboration across government – in particular, differing objectives and theories of change between government and communities that create misalignment, and the fear of loss of control that comes with sharing power.

A shift of power into communities necessarily requires government to play a different role in social sector

service provision. As one leader put it, “we should focus on being a catalyst/hub/ideas and support function but not actually running anything.”

Government needs to make the space for community providers by letting go of power and control, and recognising the value in local theories of change that look different to theirs. Government should instead focus on building capacity and capability in local communities to allow local solutions to emerge. Again, this needs to occur at a systemic level, incorporating core services and budgets – not just as an add-on at the edges.

To achieve this requires a different relationship between government and communities. The Rotorua Family Violence Collective and Manaaki Tairāwhiti Place Based Initiative provide examples of effective local collaborations between government and communities – albeit in both cases led by government agencies with a local presence. There is a need for more social sector agencies to build their confidence and capability with more sophisticated commissioning approaches – such as outcome-based contracts and partnership models, and to build the capability of their local provider relationship managers to create more nuanced, outcome-based relationships.

Communities also need investment to build their capability for evidence-based decision making – supported by access to data and analytics that the likes of the Statistics Integrated Data Infrastructure now make possible. By taking a strengths-based view of their communities, they can identify what has worked in the past, and build out further social sector interventions from there. One example we were provided was of a community with overall poor wellbeing outcomes, but which had excellent immunisation rates. By understanding what had led to the immunisation rates becoming so high, the community was able to identify other wellbeing domains they could influence in a similar way.

As long as the power balance remains primarily with the government (as funder) rather than the community there will always be distrust and risk in the relationship. Strong, confident local provision that shapes the direction of policy rather than responding to it, will shift the power balance to a better place and reduce the reliance on government agencies to say what providers can (and can’t) do, and what citizens are (and are not) entitled to.



Recommendations for system reform

For most families, our current social service system is sufficient to enable them to meet their needs and live a stable and secure life. For a small but significant number of families at risk or in crisis the current system is failing to adequately support them to make meaningful improvements in their wellbeing. These are the same families who turn up in our child poverty and suicide statistics – and who are too often one of many generations in their family to experience material disadvantage.

Based on the research and interviews we have conducted, we have identified five key recommendations for social sector system reform as shown on the right.

To achieve the step change so sorely needed in wellbeing outcomes for New Zealand families at risk or in crisis requires reform at all levels of the system – from government leadership to community providers. Such reform requires a clear mandate and strong leadership at all levels of the sector. This is by no means an impossible task, and is in many respects a more readily attainable goal than having their needs met by the current system is for families at risk or in crisis.



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01

A common theory of change

Develop a common theory of change aligned to the Living Standards Framework across government social services, and establish organisational accountability models and KPIs to support that theory of change.

02

Ease of navigation

Implement changes within and between social sector agencies to make it easier for staff and families to navigate between organisations. This could include a navigator or coach role, physical co-location, simplifying entitlements, and navigation support for staff

03

Incentivise collaboration

Reform system settings, including public financing models, structures and accountabilities to not just enable, but incentivise collaboration across government social sector agencies.

04

Invest in relationships

Shift frontline service delivery for families at risk or in crisis toward a relationship-based service, building on existing relationships held with the family in the community.

05

Invest in communities

Invest in community capability and capacity building to allow local evidence-based solutions to the challenges faced by families at risk or in crisis to emerge – supported by increased use of sophisticated commissioning approaches.

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