

More effective social services inquiry
New Zealand Productivity Commission
Te Kōmihana Whai Hua o Aotearoa
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1 December, 2014

Community Networks Wellington
P O Box 11-706
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Wellington

Tēnā kotou,

RE: Submission to the “More effective social services” issues paper

Background to Community Networks Wellington

Community Networks Wellington (until recently known as Wellington Council of Social Services) has operated in the Wellington community under various names since 1952. We are a member-based organisation with over 100 members in Wellington city and a newsletter distribution of 140. Our primary purpose is to share information, resources and knowledge with organisations and individuals working in, for and with the Wellington community to encourage a supportive, collaborative and effective community sector.

Background to the development of this submission

This submission has been compiled by the Executive Committee of Community Networks Wellington. It is based on: discussions we held as an executive at a meeting on 19 November 2014; results from a survey we conducted in February 2014 in which we enquired about the key issues our members are facing in their work; discussions with other members of Community Networks Aotearoa; and participation at a workshop focusing on this issues paper hosted by ComVoices on 25 November, 2014.

Key points

The nature of the sector

- We feel it is important to recognise the extent to which macro-level structural and systemic factors impact on individuals, families and communities, negatively affecting wellbeing and ultimately resulting in poverty and inequality. We are concerned that the causes of these structural and systemic factors are not acknowledged or adequately addressed in a social service model that is focused on purchasing outcomes without necessarily addressing the root causes of these issues.
- We are concerned that from reading the Commission’s paper there appears to be an underlying assumption that community wellbeing is an issue that can be achieved through a market economy. The shift in language (and the resulting shift in approach) that comes from describing the social sector as a ‘market place’ in which social services are ‘purchased’ to achieve pre-determined outcomes is reductionist and fails to fully understand the complexity of holistic community development and wellbeing. We are similarly concerned that for-profit companies are entering the sector with vastly different aims and objectives. We feel that a conversation about the aim of—and approach to achieving—community wellbeing is required prior to making decisions about how we

commission and who we contract to deliver services intended to achieve positive outcomes for our communities.

- We feel that funding for outcomes that are often measured quantitatively comes at the expense of quality outcomes. This situation encourages organisations to narrow their focus to deliver only those services that will achieve pre-determined outcomes rather than providing adaptive support that is responsive to meeting individuals' unique needs.

Funding

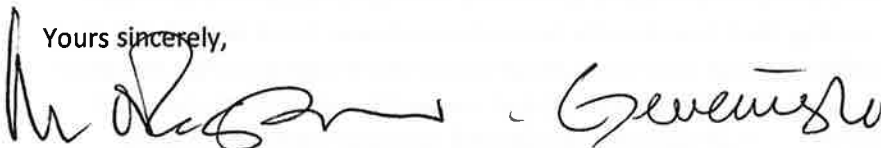
- Community Networks Wellington is by its very nature a network that exists to support and enhance collaboration between our 100 member organisations so that we are better placed to meet the complex, inter-connected needs of our community. We undertook a survey of our members in February 2014 to identify the top priorities facing the sector. Among the top five key issues identified was the tension between the requirement to collaborate while operating within a competitive funding environment. As a network that wants to collaborate and share best practice in meeting the needs of our communities we are compromised when it comes to seeking funding in a competitive environment that requires organisations to illustrate their unique services and point of difference from the very organisations with which we need to be collaborating. This situation makes potential partners and collaborators into competitors with which we are reluctant to share information, resources and ideas.
- One-off, short term, project-focused funding that cannot be used to pay for staff wages and/or overheads does not enable organisations to address the longer-term systemic issues with which we are working. We require adequate ongoing, secure funding to deliver long term, sustainable outcomes in our communities.
- While we accept that there will always be a gap between resourcing for government agencies delivering social services and the resourcing for the community sector that is being contracted to deliver services, we feel that the current gap is too great. The negative consequence of this is that knowledgeable, experienced and passionate people burn-out and leave the sector.

Evidence-based opinions vs lobbying and advocacy

- We acknowledge that long-term solutions require positive working relationships between all sectors and that good relationships require trust from all parties. We note a disturbing trend towards interpreting the community sectors' role as a voice for our client groups as being somehow subversive and undermining of government when it should be valued as evidence-based, solutions-focused input to the development of effective government policy. We are similarly concerned that the nature of government contracting can mean organisations are reluctant to speak out for fear of losing their funding.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to a discussion about how we can create a more effective social sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. We look forward to meeting with representatives of the Productivity Commission when the draft report is released for public comment in 2015.

Yours sincerely,



Mary O'Regan (Chair) and Charlie Devenish (Deputy Chair)

On behalf of Community Networks Wellington