

NZ Productivity Commission

21 November 2014

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the NZ Productivity Commission's Issues Paper "More effective social services" (October, 2014). The SPACE¹ NZ Trust is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to improving the wellbeing of children, enhancing support for parents, and contributing to building stronger communities. Our interest is as a provider of social services for parents and infants. We have provided these services since 2003.

1. Introduction

The SPACE NZ Trust appreciates the depth and breadth of this inquiry into social services provision, commissioning, purchasing and quality review. This submission is general rather than specific in nature and will not address questions specifically.

2. About the SPACE programme

SPACE is an innovative programme designed predominantly for first-time parents with newborn babies, supporting them in that first challenging year.

3. The SPACE programme is based on the premise that parents are the most important educators of their children. Based in communities, working out of early childhood education services (ECE), the SPACE programme supports a vision that New Zealand children "have the best start in life, flourish in early childhood, and are supported to reach their potential".
4. The SPACE programme objectives are to strengthen families/ whānau through the provision of quality parenting support and early childhood experiences for babies in group settings. We aim to have SPACE programmes accessible to all communities across Aotearoa/New Zealand and the SPACE NZ Trust currently works in collaborative partnerships with a diverse range of national and local, community-based organisations.
5. SPACE programmes are about intergenerational change and operate from within group settings that, by definition², have the potential to alleviate isolation and promote community wellness as parents and their infants participate together in the sessions.
6. Over the past eleven years, more than 10 480 parents and babies have already participated in programmes delivered in their local communities. In 2014, we are currently partnering with over 47 different organisations to provide 165 programmes for some 2103 new parents.

¹ SPACE is the acronym for Supporting Parents Alongside their Children's Education

² Joanou, J., Holiday D., & Swadener, B. (2012) Family and community perspectives: Voices from a qualitative study in the Southwest U.S. In J. Duncan & S. Te One, S. (eds.). (2012) *Early Childhood Education. International perspectives*. Palgrave

General comments on “*More effective social services*”

SPACE NZ acknowledges the complexity of issues associated with commissioning, purchasing, providing and evaluating social services. We also acknowledge that we work alongside social service providers to offer a complementary programme for first time parents and their infants.

7. As a provider of a parenting education programme, we do not fit the ‘social services’ box per se however, our programme evaluations reveal that some of our participants are clients in such services.
8. We consider ourselves as contributing to at least three of the Better Public Service Goals through our work in relation to the early childhood education sector and our work with vulnerable children referred to SPACE by midwives, Plunket and maternal health services. These are: increasing participation in early education, increasing immunisation rates and addressing the needs of children whose circumstances make them vulnerable to poor social outcomes.
9. We have experienced some of the tensions expressed in the Paper, particularly those concerning capacity of a non-government organisation to respond to funding applications and to making submissions. Our organisation typifies those mentioned in the Paper as one focussed on delivery of services to our participants and so does not have a large infrastructure or staff.
10. We express an overarching concern that the Paper rarely mentions children or young people and therefore risks overlooking their entitlements, through their parents or caregivers, to the services provided.
11. Consequently we believe the Commission needs to get a better sense of how children experience social services, individually and within families.

Community funding for local services

12. SPACE NZ currently partners with the Ministry of Social Development as well as private philanthropic funding organisations. A shared focus on supporting families creates common ground and has enabled SPACE NZ to build collaborative partnerships with diverse community service providers throughout New Zealand.
13. Contestable funding is an area of concern for us. As a relatively small national provider of a parenting service, we experience many of the ‘hoops’ identified in the Paper. Defining outputs and measuring outcomes are essential but limit the perceived benefits of SPACE to milestone requirements. For example, the qualitative experiences parents and children gain through their participation in SPACE are not reflected adequately as a short-term outcome.

14. We are also concerned that contestable funding makes us vulnerable to larger, better resourced organisations. As a not-for-profit and very low-cost service, with a commitment to remaining accessible, our ability to compete in a diversifying and burgeoning arena is limited. On the positive side, however, we continue to grow and expand our service due to the demand for local responsive high quality parenting support services. Underpinning our strategic plan is the need to remain sustainable. This means we can guarantee continuity of service.

Improving integration

15. In our experience, we have been extremely successful in building partnerships with other organisations, many of which are not-for-profit providers of social services. We believe the Commission is right to investigate collaborations that support innovative programmes. An example of this is our recent initiative with Parents as First Teachers (PAFT) and SPACE.

16. We believe that integrated approaches identified by the Whole Health Organisation require more investigation. Our experiences of multi-agency support and sharing of expertise as part of our SPACE sessions at a grass-roots level should be mirrored at the macro-level policy development and funding stage to ensure cross-sector efficiencies along with minimisation of sector segmentation.

17. We believe working across government sectors; health, social, education is an effective approach to better outcomes to the lives of families.

Research to build a New Zealand evidence base

18. We feel disadvantaged as a relatively new and small scale organisation because our evidence base, while growing, is not yet large scale or long term. If social services are to be improved, there has to be monies available for research of innovative programmes such as SPACE and the recent SPACE/PAFT combination.

19. We have commissioned research (Monitoring and Evaluation framework for the SPACE/PAFT hybrid model) to evaluate this programme and emergent data suggests that the home-based/group-based combination holds benefits for first-time parents and infants, especially those families identified by maternal health providers as at risk.

20. Externally funded research and self-evaluations of the SPACE programmes indicate immediate beneficial outcomes for infants and mothers in the first instance, but for fathers and extended family as well. Research-based evidence from the SPACE programme indicated that

- a. SPACE programmes empowered parents;

- b. Positively impacted the uptake of ece post programme attendance,
 - c. provided a forum for parents to seek information about social services, health, and education; and, most importantly,
 - d. enhanced community well-being for those parents.
21. Research, both qualitative and quantitative, to support and build an evidence base is important to ensure in-depth understanding of what works and why, bearing in mind that innovative practices can be highly contextualised to local communities.
22. SPACE programmes include whānau, parents and their children with a focus on strengthening community connectedness and engagement but promoting participation in community which in turn enhances community well-being.
23. Therefore, we support community-based innovations as ways to strengthen families and improve outcomes for children, families, whānau and communities.
24. SPACE is premised on the fact that every parent wants to do a good job in providing for their child but they might not have the skills and knowledge or support to do so. First-time parents can also experience feelings of isolation and loneliness in their new role. The SPACE approach is positive and inclusive, and is not about “fixing bad parenting” after a problem is identified, but supports first time parents to follow a pathway where their children will thrive.
25. SPACE programmes provide new parents with an opportunity to develop friendships with other parents and to forge links with a range of family-oriented community organizations and service providers. A good start in life can build resilience for the child and family, protecting a child against factors that put them at risk of harm and other poor life outcomes. Research has found that family engagement in early childhood services of good quality enhanced resilience, particularly among vulnerable populations who are more likely to require social services.
26. The concept of SPACE NZ being part of such community hubs is one that we have been exploring for some time, and provides opportunities for effective, community-based, collaborative ways to support children and families.

Concluding comments

27. At SPACE NZ Trust, we are part of a growing movement that recognises and promotes the role of family as central to the children’s well-being, family cohesive and connectedness. This involves providing a high quality parenting and child support programme to local communities, as well as creating links, fostering relationships with other families, and enhancing the connectedness between families and community organisations.

28. Community-based, not-for-profit organisations have a crucial role to play in mitigating the risks to children, and smaller organisations often have minimal government support (the SPACE programme is one such example). Relatively small levels of support for these strengths-based programmes potentially generate huge returns over the medium and long term, by decreasing risks to children's health, social and educational well-being thereby reducing the need for costly interventions and social services.
29. While we acknowledge the need for economic, social and political solutions, we believe the ability of community organisations working in collaborative partnerships with others enhance social wellbeing. International and New Zealand research indicates that these approaches need further support and exploration.
30. We support the international findings (as listed on p 35) which conclude that a range of factors coalesce to improve the quality of social services for children and families.

We would be happy to discuss any elements of our submission with you.

Sincerely

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