

# Te Whānau Aroha: an example of youth engagement



THE MINISTER FOR CHILDREN'S YOUTH ADVISORY PANEL OF YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCED IN STATE CARE

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The Office of the Children's Commissioner promotes the participation of children and young people in decisions that affect them. When done well, it upholds their right to have a say and be heard, it advances the best interests of children and young people and produces better decision-making overall. We endeavour to model best practice for engaging children and young people, as well as encouraging other organisations to do the same. [Find more case studies on our website www.occ.org.nz](http://www.occ.org.nz)

## Introduction

In early 2016, the then Minister for Children, Anne Tolley, asked the Office of the Children's Commissioner [OCC] to convene a panel of young people experienced in the State care system to advise her on substantial changes to the system. The Office did not have any surplus resources for this work, and decided to use the funding provided to contract specialist support. SV8 Consulting were contracted to run the advisory panel, which met between May 2016 and August 2017. SV8 and the Children's Commissioner co-produced the outcomes.

Two SV8 staff members were involved and each had separate and distinct roles. Serena Curtis-Lemuelu facilitated the meetings and made sure that the young people were able to voice their thoughts and opinions, and Natasha Maraku organized the meetings, travel, accommodation and so forth. She ensured the young people had what they needed from the point of view of logistics and comfort so that they were in the best space to focus on the task at hand. Having discrete facilitator and logistical roles were central to the overall success of the engagement and helped the process to run smoothly for the young people.

The panel's purpose was to support the minister's decision-making and keep the voices of young people at the centre of the design and development of the changing social services system. The group was named Te Whānau Aroha - the 'family of love'. This name was chosen by the group members. The primary role of Te Whānau Aroha was to provide the Minister with independent advice on some of the transformations proposed to the processes and services delivering care and support for children and young people (both those in the care of the State and those on the threshold of being taken into care). In particular, the Minister wanted to hear:

- The advisors' experience of both statutory care and early intervention services;

### About the Office of the Children's Commissioner

The 1.1 million children and young people under 18 make up 24% of New Zealand.

The Children's Commissioner Judge Andrew Becroft and his office advocate for their interests, ensure their rights are upheld, and help them have a say on matters that affect them.

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- Key transition points in the system (e.g. between non-statutory and statutory services; between care placements; between the Care and Protection and the Youth Justice systems; between youth and adult justice systems; and the final transition out of the State system);
  - What a child-centred system would look like from their perspective.

## Method

The terms of reference for the advisory panel were developed by SV8 staff in consultation with OCC staff and approved by the Minister. They specified that the group was large enough to reflect diversity of experience and a mix of genders, ethnicity and geography, but still small enough to work together effectively (the final number of young people was seven). The group was made up of:

- A variety of ethnic backgrounds (members identified as either Māori, Pacific Island, Chinese, Fijian Indian and European or a blend of those);
- Two genders (3x cis male members and 4x cis female members);
- A broad geographical mix (members came from Te Tai Tokerau, the Midlands, Central and Southern regions of New Zealand<sup>1</sup>);
- Members aged 16 years and over, as this was considered to be the appropriate level of maturity and ability needed to participate in this type of process. Note: young people over the age of 16 were able to give individual consent to being involved; for 16 year olds, consent of caregivers as well as the young people was required.

The terms of reference specified that meetings and electronic contact were the engagement methods. The group was initially asked to attend five face-to-face meetings held in Wellington. As Te Whānau Aroha's term came close to the end, the Minister requested two further face-to-face meetings, and the group agreed to this extension. Members were fully briefed on the level of commitment the group would require. This was extensive. They needed to attend all meetings and read any pre-meeting material so that they could participate fully. They were also advised that from time to time they may be called on to provide further insight and advice via email and a closed Facebook group.

The process of selection used a nominations process, having gathered potential applicants by sharing the terms of reference through relevant networks. Much of this work was done by SV8 staff in consultation with OCC staff and social workers and care-givers, who helped young people to put together information about themselves for the Minister's consideration. Young people were asked to forward a biography which explained where they were from, their ethnicity and experience of the care system, their interests and what they were doing at the time of applying.

Once young people were selected, the OCC confirmed their appointments by letter and SV8 staff set about organising meetings (which included dates, times, venues, travel and accommodation). Initially every member that was flying into Wellington was met at the airport and taken to the meeting venue (with those who were Wellington residents being met outside the venue and then taken inside).

Notes were taken during all meetings from which a 'Statement' was crafted and distributed to the Minister, the Children's Commissioner and the CEO of Oranga Tamariki. Setting the meeting agendas needed to consider the Minister's needs as well as ensuring the best use of the young people's time and expertise, and the best approach to the engagement. This required both SV8 staff to work closely

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<sup>1</sup> Geographical regions based on Oranga Tamariki's five "Partnering for Outcomes" areas.



with the Minister's office and Oranga Tamariki staff.

All meetings were facilitated by Serena. This ensured continuity and was of assistance to the young people, as they became very familiar with Serena's style and developed trust in her to run a safe, effective process.

## What worked

Youth advisory groups are difficult to get right and very helpful indeed when they work well. The information below sets out what the facilitators found worked well and supported positive relationships with young people.

### TEAM QUALITIES

The qualities of the engagement team have to be right. SV8 has emphasised that a two-person team with defined roles was very effective in creating an engaged youth advisory panel, which the young people also enjoyed being part of. The SV8 staff had the necessary skills for the job, but their qualities of openness and honesty as well as genuineness towards the young people were really important. This is illustrated by what one Te Whānau Aroha group member said:

"During the meeting it was helpful to be able to communicate when we needed a break and if we were feeling overwhelmed during sessions. This was done verbally but also non-verbally. It meant that our facilitators had to be able to read body language and hear in our conversations when it was starting to get too much or we needed a 'time-out'."

### BEING CONSISTENT

The same person facilitating and supporting each meeting is important. As well, it is important to have more than one adult, so it is possible to respond to one young person's needs while continuing to facilitate the rest of the group. In Te Whānau Aroha this could include assisting a young person who found themselves struggling with a trauma from the past, for instance.

The venue was the same for each visit to Wellington and special care was taken to ensure the young people were all accommodated on the same floor in separate rooms when they needed to stay overnight.

### BEING RELIABLE

All air and road travel (including transfers to and from locations) was arranged and communicated to the young people (and where necessary their caregivers) well before they were due to meet. Te Whānau Aroha members who were flying into Wellington were always met at the airport by the SV8 facilitator or support person; likewise group members were seen off in person (unless they advised an alternative plan). Any panel members under the age of 17 years were accompanied by the facilitator or support person whenever they were visiting Wellington.

One young person said:

*"Serena has been both protector and carer throughout this journey. That has been an eye opening experience."*



The facilitator and support person emphasised that it was very important to listen to what the young people wanted and always followed through on anything they said they would do.

As the facilitator says:

*“Young people have good memories and can relay many stories of times when they have been let down.”*

### **COVERING ALL EXPENSES UP-FRONT**

It is important to recognise and respect that young people often don't have much money. For Te Whānau Aroha members, the facilitator and support person dealt with all meeting expenses up-front, so that there was no need for the young people to cover these costs or be concerned that they wouldn't be able to make it to meetings.

All meals, including morning and afternoon tea, were provided and where group members were staying overnight, 'snack packs' were also provided (which were equivalent to hotel mini bars but without alcohol). The young people were also given a koha for the days they participated in meetings. This was all part of showing the young people that their contribution was valued.

### **BEING INCLUSIVE**

A partnership approach was taken by the facilitator and support person, by engaging young people in the thinking processes and in decisions on the content of meetings and records of meeting outcomes. Where issues generated lots of discussion on the day, the facilitator was flexible enough to allow more time for discussion so as not to cut short young people's contributions. If content from the engagement was to be published, the timing and details of the content was always agreed with the young people beforehand.

### **BEING CLEAR AND UP-FRONT**

Te Whānau Aroha had a terms of reference document to help the group members know exactly what was expected of them and to define their roles and responsibilities. The dates and times for meetings in person were clearly communicated to them (and their caregivers where necessary) at least a month in advance. Meeting agendas and supporting information were sent beforehand so the young people knew what to expect and could prepare.

### **BEING ADAPTABLE AND FLEXIBLE**

The facilitator and support person created a wide range of safe spaces and opportunities for Te Whānau Aroha members to share their views (both in a group and in one-on-one situations). Members often shared insights between meeting times or during breaks, over dinner or during a walk from one place to another.

The facilitator also found using a variety of methods worked to engage with Te Whānau Aroha members (such as face-to-face meetings, emails, text messaging and social media tools). This gave the young people the choice to use the engagement mode that worked in the moment – therefore giving the facilitator more content to work with.



## BEING SUPPORTIVE

Information was age-appropriate, messaged in language the young people were comfortable with, and delivered in a way that was engaging for the group. If a young person became unsettled, it was important for the facilitators to notice that, to recognise that meeting content might have triggered something for that young person, and to respond appropriately. This support was available between meetings as well.

## RESPECTING THE RELATIONSHIP

Building trusting relationships with young people takes time. The facilitator and support person made sure they were available to the group members at any time, for any reason, and were able to provide good advice and support as needed. This was made easier because they shared their mobile numbers and email addresses with the young people (rather than requiring them to go through an office administrator). Pastoral care was a key component; it showed that the engagement was based on mutual respect.

The engagement process was not just about accessing the young people's expertise; it was also about helping them to get what they wanted (or to where they needed to be). One way of doing this was by allowing young people to ask questions and providing them with straightforward and honest answers. Group members said this:

"The building blocks of how our group would operate happened over time and naturally fell in to place with support from Serena and Natasha."

"I found the experience very valuable and humbling. It was amazing to be a part of a "Family", I thought each member was really supportive of the others, whether it be during meetings or throughout our day-to-day matters."

## RESPECTING THE GROUP

The facilitator was intentional in the way that she facilitated the group's conversations and designed the space. For instance, the young people were always the majority in the meeting space. If adult visitors were invited, the numbers attending would be managed by the facilitator and support person. Content to be presented to the young people would also be checked for relevance and to make sure it was well-prepared and appropriate to the group. One young person's feedback supports this:

"I felt that Serena and Natasha had prepared us exceptionally well for how sessions were about to run but also did background preparation with the people coming in to run the sessions. This allowed our presenters to know what we were expecting so that sessions were productive for both them and us."

The group's own words were used when conveying key messages from a meeting to the Minister, because it was understood that the young people's voices were powerful and essential.



## Outcomes

In any engagement process, it is important that the participants know how their feedback has been received and its impact. This is particularly so when the method used has the intensity of an advisory group (as distinct from an online survey, for instance). We had feedback that the advisory group was valued by the Minister, by Oranga Tamariki staff, and by the young people themselves.

Te Whānau Aroha's advice was valued by the former Minister for Children; she publicly acknowledged their role and that they informed and influenced her decisions on the Oranga Tamariki legislation and policy. The young people's feedback to Oranga Tamariki staff also influenced the design of aspects of Oranga Tamariki's service provision. The young people themselves also valued being involved in the process, and it has ignited their enthusiasm to remain connected to initiatives focused on improving the system for children and young people in care.

## Conclusion

Achieving successful outcomes with youth advisory groups requires intensive preparation, sufficient funding, and defined roles, which are performed by skilled people with a strong commitment to the process. Adult team qualities of openness, honesty and genuineness towards the young people are fundamental.