

Media statement

State of Care 2016: move to child-centred culture must begin now

"When I walk down the street I see families walking along, laughing, happy, and it is hard knowing that I don't have a family like that". – Child in non-kin foster care.

Moving to a more child-centred culture within Child, Youth and Family can and must start now if we want to see better outcomes for children currently in care and build a strong platform for the reforms to come, says Children's Commissioner Dr Russell Wills.

This is a key theme of his Office's second annual public report on the service Child, Youth and Family provides to our most vulnerable children. The *State of Care 2016* report is a summary of findings and recommendations from the Office of the Children's Commissioner's independent monitoring of Child, Youth and Family.

The report suggests that while the up-coming reforms of the care and protection and youth justice systems have great potential, the children currently in the system need to receive more child-centred services right now. It also suggests there is a risk that children will be impacted by a drop in organisational performance during the transition.

"I'm critically aware that with such major change comes risk. Reforms are known to cause a dip in performance - but we are talking about kids' lives here - not profit margins. There needs to be a plan to ensure they are not negatively impacted during this transition phase," says Dr Wills.

"The system is about to be turned on its head and I am very optimistic these reforms will lead to better lives for our most vulnerable children. But there are some areas where changes could happen right now – changes that could also ensure the new agency is in a good position to work in a child-centred way when it's up and running. Most of the workforce now will be the staff of the future agency. So it's important that the culture of the organisation is addressed as soon as possible.

"You would think that an organisation like Child, Youth and Family would already have children at the heart of what they do. But in our experience, while the organisation has many good people working very hard and already has a child-centred vision, they need to be better supported to be consistently child-centred in practice. A great start would be to develop a clear statement on what being child-centred means and how staff at all levels can make it happen.

"'Child-centred' is a widely used, but often misunderstood term. Key to being child-centred is asking a child what they need, explaining what is happening to them and working with them on a plan. It means prioritising their needs over paperwork or other demands. Of course, a child's needs must be assessed in the context of their family and whānau and after using professional judgement. But above all, being child-centred is about genuinely listening to the child.

"We are constantly blown away by the wisdom and insightfulness of the children we visit in our monitoring of Child, Youth and Family. These kids have been through so much and are very clear about what they need. We all need to listen to children far more.

“Children have some clear messages. They want to feel like they belong to their culture and their family and whānau, they want to be involved in decisions about their lives and they want social workers to respect them and treat them well.

“These are simple requests. The direction of the reforms, with their focus on child-centredness, suggest that children in the future will be more likely to have these needs met.

“The success of these reforms however, depends on building a good platform now. That way staff can not only provide a better service for those children in the system right now, but also be in a good position to work in child-centred ways when the new system is up and running.” says Dr Wills.

Notes:

The State of Care 2016 report has three major recommendations:

- Recommendation 1: Plan to reduce the risk to children and young people of a dip in performance during the transition period
- Recommendation 2: Develop a clear understanding of child-centred practice in the particular cultural and organisational context of the New Zealand care and protection and youth justice systems.
- Recommendation 3: Empower and support staff now to strengthen their child-centred practice

The Children’s Commissioner is an independent crown entity. The role is mandated to independently monitor services to children under the Child, Young Person and their Families Act, 1989. In practice, this involves monitoring the policy, practice and service provided by Child, Youth and Family.

This is our second annual report. It aggregates the findings of the monitoring reports we completed for a sample of Child, Youth and Family sites and residences between June 2015 and June 2016, and summarises the voices of children in care who shared their views with us during that time.

The report also includes the findings from two thematic reviews. These reviews focus on a particular aspect of the care and protection or youth justice system. This year’s themes were:

- The quality of case management for children and young people living in non-kin foster care placements
- The quality of case management for young people with dual care and protection and youth justice status.

Information that could identify individual children, staff members, sites, or residences has been removed to protect privacy and preserve our ability to engage openly with CYF and other stakeholders in future.

The report is available on-line at www.occ.org.nz/state-of-care