



E nga mana, e nga reo, rau Rangatira ma, e te iwi Ngai Tahu whanui

Tena koutou katoa

Ko Len Cook taku ingoa

Tenei taku mihi ki a koutou katoa.

No reira tena koutou katoa

What makes evaluation “fit for purpose”

Ma Te huruhuru, Ka rere Te manu¹ - Adorn the bird with feathers so it can fly

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Abstract:

The Productivity Commission Review of Social Services, the review of CYPS, the Children’s Commissioner 2016 annual report and the focus now on social investment deepen concern about the condition of social services. As society becomes more diverse and social conditions more complex, the unintended consequences of piecemeal responses to issues can outweigh the benefits.

In seeing the social services system as a complex network of organisations, connected by a focus on the experience of citizens, the implications for public trust, evaluation, information sharing and the capacity to innovate are discussed. The limitations on innovation resulting from the public sector re-organisation of 25 years ago are discussed.

The paper shows how the place of evaluation and the capacity to innovate is important for managing the tension between timely policy development and effective implementation in the social services system.

¹ Where the bird epitomises services, the feathers epitomise evaluation -its evolution, comprehensiveness, structure, and accumulated knowledge and experience. For some birds, feathers are oiled for extra protection. It also demonstrates the knowledge all need in common when part of a “flock” or network. All birds have feathers that fit their place in nature - what about social services?

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Introduction

Overview

We are now seeing an invigorated emphasis on evaluation and evidence alongside a highly significant expansion of the information available for developing social services policy and assessing operational performance and citizen experiences. Recent reviews have highlighted the cost of neglecting to systematically evaluate operational practice and the long-term costs of not questioning the quality of consumer experiences when determining the effectiveness of policy settings. Obtaining information that can enable facilitation of the use of services has sometimes been secondary to that needed for an increasing array of sanctions and penalties.

In this presentation, I will focus mainly on approaches to evaluation that support improving operational performance of agreed policy rather than the development of new policy. Improving services through learning from the experiences that occur every day requires some systematic approaches to gathering evidence, and then making it useful. I will reflect on some of the learning gained by Superu in working with the NGO sector.

Much understanding of social services that is conceptually relevant and important may not have been readily amenable to statistically robust measurement method for reasons of cost, practicability or limited choice of method. Successive governments have undervalued the importance of evaluation in departmental work, and in the expectations that they have placed on others whom they influence. Contractual obligations to report have often generated monitoring requirements that undermine rather than reinforce what is needed for continuous improvement. This has reduced the autonomy that organisations must have to lead improvements in their own performance, and to contribute to the improved performance of the field of endeavor that they are a part of. It has also led to a variable commitment to gathering baseline data in a systematized manner once commitments have been made to initiate programmes. Regardless of the quality of the evidence base that led to policy, there is a need to develop and enrich the evidence base to enable innovation and improvement, and enable later review to be more soundly based.

Finding ways to better accumulate information about the experiences people have with social services for to analyse performance and evolve organizational practice is becoming a more realistic expectation, but it needs political, managerial and staff commitment, as well as access to common tools. This especially so in areas of social services where there are many agents, as well as where there has been insufficient opportunity to have a scientific approach to information gathering material to decision-making.

Effective connections between partner organisations and sharing of experiences requires thoughtful identification and investment in the elements that they should have in common. Several decades of public sector reforms in New Zealand founded on organizational autonomy have set back advances that require common investment and sharing of experiences. Recent developments including Whanau Ora, the social investment thinking, initiatives in family violence, protection of children, youth mental health and coordinated regional initiatives challenge the autonomy of agencies and the associated self-referencing measures of performance.

Some definitions

There many quite similar ways that evaluation can be defined. I will adopt for this presentation a definition of evaluation as *“to judge the value or condition of (someone or*

something) in a careful and thoughtful way.”

This implies a systematic approach to monitoring, collection and analysis, and deliberation and response to the findings.

Fit for purpose is contextually determined, and implies confidence in understanding whatever obligations to act are generated, and how to do so, for the concern being addressed. There are three levels of fit for purpose; Accountability (monitoring and measuring), Development (strengthening an organization or process), Knowledge (creating deeper understanding of issue at hand).

Evidence – *“signs or indications of something”*

For evidence to mean a better service, it needs to be available, organized and deliberated on. Particularly, how will this year’s experiences improve what is to be done in following year? How will the underlying policy be better informed? How will the evidence gathering processes distill these experiences?

Aspirations and autonomy shape evaluation scope and practice

The lives of citizens are much more variable than can ever be captured by the information gathered in research models and administrative data collections. Operational rules and analytical models generally fail to consider this natural variability and uncertainty. This influences the autonomy and aspirations on which social services need to be founded.

Autonomy is important at three levels in social services. The leaders of the system, Ministers and senior public servants, need to be open to having processes challenged, where their cost to citizens and to government is unjustifiable, by what is achieved. Evaluation plays a vital role in informed challenge of the worthwhileness of programmes, and their evolution.

Operational autonomy requires trust in staff and people need to be trained and trusted, and allowed to apply informed judgment, for the processes to be seen and trusted by others as effective. The last decades have seen moves in the opposite direction, where detailed processes are intended to prevent every past adverse event, reducing the autonomy people have when they respond to situations. Over the last two decades, by command from the top, social services have increasingly adopted cumbersome processes, with a reducing focus on “the right thing to do”, for the consumer.

The third level of autonomy is respect for the autonomy of citizens themselves, in both operational process and evaluation.

We need to enrich our aspirations for the social services system, and recent reports by the Productivity Commission, the Children’s Commissioner and the Review Panel on Children and Young Persons have pinpointed to ways how we can to pursue our aspirations more intently.

People involved in social services usually have high aspirations for those they are supporting, but that is far from universal. Our vision of a future New Zealand rests on a far larger share of each new generation of babies having better health and educational outcomes than earlier generations. New Zealand has had a nearly constant level of babies every decade since 1950, averaging some 60,000 births per year. This is projected to

continue until around 2050. We are unusual among OECD countries in the continued fertility of New Zealand families. Without taking full advantage of the options we have to provide a consistent level of health care and education access to all these children, we ignore the tremendous demographic advantages New Zealand has. Aspirations must include all communities, ethnicities, genders and abilities. Mixed aspirations can lead to unintended bias in applying discretions, as has been observed many times in all areas of the justice system.

Most importantly, we need to find ways of inspiring the aspirations of all in each new generation, at the critical formative stages of their lives. Evaluation plays a part in shaping aspirations, as did much of the poor social analyses of the 1970s and its pathology of failure for Maori and Pacific peoples.

Recent decades have seen the scope and form of information generated through the experiences of community organisations become dominated by the monitoring demands of contracting departments. As the potential for gathering and organizing the evidence from client experiences has grown, information that could inform the improvement of services and innovation has been narrowed by an outdated self-referencing view how to assess worthwhileness.

In this presentation, I argue that the opportunities that now exist to accumulate and manage evidence about what is happening in community run services have the potential to uplift continuous improvement and innovation. This is because of the quality and strength of connections with clients, but requires the monitoring requirements of contracting agencies to be placed alongside rather than given primacy in your work.

Learning from recent examples where fitness for purpose of evaluation has been inadequate or inadequately explained

Havelock north town water supply

Free access to pure water is a vital part of our health system. When water no longer deserves the trust we place in it, then its use should be prevented as soon as it is known to be unsafe. In Havelock North drinking the town water became a cause of illness rather than part of the cure. People continued using polluted water as though it was assumed to be safe. "It has been said that information about the contamination was not available or shared soon enough and that the risks associated with the Havelock North water were not managed transparently. Whether that was the case will no doubt be determined by the forthcoming inquiry. If it turns out that there was an avoidable delay, then citizens were put at needless risk. It goes without saying that the right thing to do by way of management process when public safety is at risk is to act rapidly, outside of the regular decision-making. Furthermore, if people's health is at risk, then information will need to get to every single citizen with the same reliability. The best medium from a citizen's point of view will vary with the age and attributes of the citizen, not the people delivering the message. We have a lot to learn from the results of the forthcoming inquiry.

Prisons and SERCO

The Department of Corrections assessed their Mount Eden Corrections Facility run by SERCO as "Exceptional" every quarter from January 2014 until the practices at Mt Eden were exposed, and the performance failings resulted in SERCO ceasing to be responsible

for prison management.

Work and Income and WorkSafe

The deliberation on the administrative arguments in a judicial process brings a much-needed reflection on the variety of perspectives that need to be considered by exposure to independent assessment. Following the tragic killing of Work and Income employees in Ashburton, WorkSafe have argued to the Court that Work and Income regional offices should be glassed off. To prevent an “extreme active short event”, clients would only be able to see workers when invited in to the office. Alternative arguments were presented that pointed out that as we have so few such events, we cannot estimate their likelihood. If access was restricted, there would be a need to also account for the personal cost to individuals visiting Work and Income offices, and the change in relationship between Work and Income and its client base. Many people who visit Work and Income offices already find it uncomfortable. Making the service more impersonal increases the likelihood of misunderstanding and limits the range of support that may be offered. Independent assessment can balance the likely harm done to all clients of Work & Income, and assess the severity of the WorkSafe proposal, especially as the Ministry of Social Development operates with ‘clients’ in several different settings, including with vulnerable children and families- and the WorkSafe thinking has the potential to reach across to other govt agencies and their interactions also.

SUDS and pepi-pods

New Zealand has the highest rate of sudden unexpected death in infants (SUDI) in the western world, with Maori babies greatly over-represented. In 2012 The Minister of Health accepted pepi-pods as a solution. However, this decision was later reversed without fully understanding the arguments and experience with their use. The Ministry then went so far as to refuse funding for pepi-pods, dismissing their value entirely. Despite this, they were used, and monitored for a scientific evaluation. This evaluation showed there were fewer incidents of SUDI for Maori, which is where the programme was largely targeted and in the regions with the greatest distribution of pēpi-pods. After Ministerial intervention, they are now once again funded.

Housing NZ and “P” testing

The severity of response generated by an administrative process needs to be accompanied by the appropriate certainty of guilt. After two Court cases to evict tenants were dismissed, Housing New Zealand has admitted that their test to measure the presence of methamphetamine is not fit for purpose. The seriousness with which methamphetamine addiction and the harms it causes is well recognised. The cost to individuals associated with “P” is high – being blacklisted by HNZ, massive clean-up bills, and possible oversight of children by CYPS. The discovery that the prevalence of “P” at levels above the HNZ thresholds was widespread (even on banknotes) has brought these tests into disrepute not only by the Courts. This again should be cause for reflection.

Community placement of convicted paedophiles

Balancing competing rights is immensely difficult and where the protection from a harm is involved we need to estimate its impact comprehensively and objectively. When Corrections place paedophiles amongst communities with young children, they have two contradictory rights to balance – that of a prisoner who has served time for offences, and that of children who society is expected to protect from harm. We know that the harm done to children from

child abuse is immense and the consequences for them often lifelong. Prisons also seek to rehabilitate offenders, but where recidivism is likely, perhaps there needs to be transparency or independent oversight to provide confidence that any response best reflects the nature of the harm.

All these very topical examples point to the potential of some evaluation processes to obscure rather than pinpoint whether what is being done is both worthwhile, and the right thing to do. The outcome of poor or no evaluation can in fact lead to harm. The Better Public Services initiative was heralded by rhetoric of a public service going from “Great to Good”. These examples generally highlight a lack of evidence about what citizen’s experience that is good, and demonstrate insufficient commitment to quality management essential to being on a pathway to great.

The consequences of a legacy of inadequate evaluation

In any programme or service, there is a need to know how services are to be delivered and why they are of value to the recipient, and how to improve them. Each year, the additional experience should add evidence to the knowledgebase that informs the capacity to improve on existing performance. There are always limits on how social services of any type will perform, and the degree of uncertainty of their effectiveness in any situation results from a mix of causes. Uncertainty in performance results from a mix of unjustified confidence in policy analysis, the changing character of the population and how they live, unrealistic expectations about service delivery, a poor history of evaluation, periodic fashions that narrow the scope of evaluation, and a muddled responsibility for the system. These have influenced our legacy of programmes and practices.

Unjustified confidence in policy analysis

- a) Policy is often developed by modelling a sample of comparable people from an earlier time. Such models will at best encapsulate and summarise some of the influences on the outcome sort, and might enable the net impact of the service to be assessed. Many of the attributes of recipients that are significant to their need and eligibility for the service will only be recognized at the time the service is delivered, and may only influence the nature of the service if there is some form of evaluation after commencement, or pilot testing.
- b) The key assumptions behind policies may not be as relevant as programmes run their course.
- c) Single agency or sector responses are less likely to meet the long term needs of vulnerable people and tend to put the short-term performance of the agency, rather than the interests of the child or family, at the centre of decision-making.
- d) The distinct characteristics of Maori and Pacific people and their community forms are usually poorly represented in analytical sources and models.

Populations are continually changing in structures, place and composition

- a) New Zealand society has become more complex, families and communities are less and less homogeneous in their nature, and there is a growing range of social services provision involving frequent long-term interactions with the same people, which are often poorly managed overall.

Untested expectations about service delivery

- a) The high failure rate among social service programmes reported internationally by evaluation studies is poorly recognized when assessing the need for evaluation.
- b) In programmes involved in protecting people from harm, such as family violence or child protection, programme failure can bring more harm to the recipient.
- c) Many of our approaches reinforce deficits for Māori and ignore the strengths and opportunities that exist within whanau and hapu to create change for themselves.

Received wisdom of the times that narrows the scope of evaluation

- a) Government agency contracts often specify measures of performance that relate to the needs of the contracting agency rather than either the service recipient or the contracted provider, and these can crowd out the capacity for evaluation necessary to improve the services they deliver.
- b) Outputs, outcomes, results, fiscal benefits are partial determinants of worthwhileness
- c) Continuous improvement is not well embedded in social services practice across the public sector.
- d) For many policies, there are unintended consequences, good and bad. New Zealand Superannuation is an unusually good example of a policy where there were unintended benefits for the independence of women in married benefit households, incentives to continue participation in the labour force by older people, and a good substitute for a failed annuity industry. However, the associated loss of other programmes ignored difficulties that could not be resolved by having a common income level alone.

A poor basis from experience

- a) Regardless of how policy is initiated, baseline data needs to be collected from the inception of any service, so that the accumulated experience can drive improvement, stimulate innovation and inform later reflection on the shape of policy as better information comes through.
- b) Publishing of evaluations that are done is irregular, and therefore the opportunity to accumulate the knowledge from experience in comparable situations is a significant opportunity lost to all social services providers.
- c) The model of competitive tendering impairs the willingness to exchange experiences as knowledge which should be common to all is commercial property.
- d) The record of evaluation among social services agencies is poor compared to that regarded as normal in the health sector.
- e) SMART requirements can result in the non-use of assessments of difficult to measure conditions.

Narrowed understanding who provides social services

In his submission to the Productivity Commission review of social services, former Children's Commissioner Dr. John Angus¹ noted that.....

Social service production

Most social services are delivered by family members and informal community groups, not by government, or by the formalised FP and NFP NGO sector. One needs only to reflect on the extent to which services to restore health depend on individuals, partners, family members and friends. Similarly responses to deal with the psychological harm caused by violence primarily come from family and friends. And at least twice as much intervention and day to day care of children in need of care and protection is provided by extended family members, often acting independently of Child Youth and Family, than by state provision.

The role played by families is not acknowledged at all in your Issues paper and the role played by less formal community based institutions such as networks of friends, or fellow members of churches, or sports clubs is given scant recognition. Yet as Richard Wood notes in his submission:

Whilst few NGOs will report this, the most vulnerable people in NZ will not go to them for help. The most vulnerable will turn first to a family member or friend. These people actually need support to access and engage with services and have a range of needs outside the scope of a single agency. The most vulnerable are cautious about talking to anyone about their issues and need to have developed a level of trust with people they don't know before they will even talk about their problems. As an example Youthline has reported that, on average, a teen caller will send a minimum of seven text conversations before they are prepared to engage in a telephone conversation. The best way to provide support for the most vulnerable is to encourage community networks in places to which these people are likely to gravitate, such as schools, community or medical centres or marae. Helplines are another key touch point for the most vulnerable that receive only limited funding by Government

Definition of social services

You have provided a definition of social services that is much narrower than a definition that includes families and communities. This is because the inquiry is 'primarily concerned with social services provided, funded or otherwise supported by government'. This might of course include support for organisations that work to assist families. In the area I know about this definition is further narrowed down, albeit because of your TOR, to a focus on government's purchase of services from third parties, and does not include direct delivery by government departments, which much of the intervention with families is.

Given these insights, it is not surprising therefore that most information gathered by the state about its citizens is about their demographic, social and economic characteristics, or as participants in programmes, and little about their place as ordinary citizens just providing care and advice. Without such information, little can be directed at bettering and extending what people within families and communities already do, yet we know that in the case of family violence, protection from harm of children and health, any such well-motivated contribution can be most influential, and more so when well informed. Citizen based activities play a huge part in people's wellbeing, although they are more often hindered by insensitive regulations, rather than enabled and informed by policy. Iwi and hapu initiatives, and those of Pacific communities are generally undervalued in the same way.

Muddled responsibility for the system as a whole

- a) Social services involve a diverse range of community, government and commercial providers operating in a system where responsibility for outcomes needs to be clear to all, and contestability not undermined by commissioning practices.

- b) In these loose networks of delivery organisations, there has been little focus on integrating the constituent parts using information to ensure their overall performance.
- c) How well this network facilitation is understood, managed and resourced in social investment will determine the capacity of the social services system to meet the needs of an increasingly complex society and to collect and use the information we need to change long term outcomes in key areas of social concern.
- d) Forming contractual arrangements and burdensome performance requirements has long been the norm, undermining innovation, clarity of responsibility for consumer experiences, and genuine accountability.

What “fit for purpose” means for evaluation in social services now

The Productivity Commission Review of the Social Services brought a spotlight on these issues, the draft report on services for children and young persons provided an immediate case study exemplifying these concerns, the review of policy in the public services, but also in period reports by review bodies. These reviews point to the very high costs to citizens of delaying opportunities to act more effectively about various sorts of such failings, as well as the longer term fiscal costs. The findings point to significant opportunities to improve the social services system through a strong focus on the use of existing information, known methods and the available science base. These include:

I. Extended requirement for informed foresight

- i. Insufficient investment in modelling of relevant populations to foresee policy obsolescence and signal the need for new programmes at a time that enables a managed transition to new systems, statutes or institutions
- ii. Insufficient monitoring of the continued relevance of key assumptions behind policies
- iii. Limited ability to quickly assess the relevance of the plethora of partly relevant information increasingly available that can have an immediate impact on public sentiment and distort public concern about well-founded evidence

II. Comprehensive embedding of a commitment to evaluation practice

- i. The thinking and experiences that drive policy models in public administration often underestimate practical issues likely in application across the many parts of the social services system
- ii. There are poor information flows among participants in the social services system
- iii. Consumer autonomy and engagement is poorly supported and even undermined in many services
- iv. Accountability dominates managerial information processes (funder dominance), and the consequent limiting to information flows reduces the continuous improvement and innovation vital at an operational level.
- v. We are not ready to exploit the potential for information and communications technologies to enrich the quality of public services through both new and existing information sources
- vi. Contracting agencies provide poor feedback on the value of the information obtained through monitoring obligations that they impose.
- vii. Community sector evidence for innovation and continuous improvement needs to be supported rather than undermined by contractual obligations for monitoring.
- viii. However, policies are initiated, baseline data gathered in a systematic way from inception is not regarded as essential for continuous improvement and better information evaluation at a later stage.

III. Adopting methods that have comparable relevance to Maori in both the integrity of policy analysis and ensuring operational effectiveness

IV. Taking responsibility for leadership in system improvement.

Information and social services policy and delivery

How information is prepared and used to hold government to account is vital for the health of a democratic society. What makes this challenging is that the very apparatus of the state that is being monitored has prime but not necessarily sole responsibility for enabling the monitoring to take place.

The Productivity Commission Review of Social Services, the review of CYPS, the Children's Commissioner 2016 annual report and the focus now on social investment deepen concern about the condition of social services. As society becomes more diverse and social conditions more complex, the unintended consequences of piecemeal responses to issues can outweigh the benefits, particularly in protecting people from harm.

Where dysfunction in policy selection and operational practice exists, this amplifies the level of trial and error in the social services system. This is exacerbated by the limited application of strategies for continuous improvement or for system modelling that lead to innovation and adaptability. The negative impact of this on the quality of services provided to citizens is difficult to quantify because of the low level of information often gathered³.

What is key to evaluation being "fit for purpose" is that all parties, politicians, funders, contracting agencies, and service providers and staff recognize its very necessity as part of the core operations of social services. We all need to accept that we need to continually test the relevance of assumptions and identify in advance how to determine whenever information that arises during programme delivery is material to improving the worthwhileness of the services received.

Research and evaluation as the source of a vital common resource

New Zealand' families, households and communities will most certainly continue to experience significant change in their make-up, form, mix and comparative fragility, as will the nature of government policy preferences. It is not only the programmes and policy across the social sector that reflect long standing policy preferences but also the core operational processes of government that will continue to need to adapt better than in the past.

Recent reviews have provided strong evidence of a serious deficiency in how the knowledge and know how we already have within the social services sector can be drawn on in informing prospective policy options and improving practice. Deficiencies result from the absence of generally accepted scientific models which establish relationships and causality between conditions, poor recording and analysis of the effectiveness of components of services, not using relevant metrics for reporting impacts; weak sharing of experiences within and among public sector and community organisations.

Collaboration among public agencies has been a weak element in New Zealand's public sector reforms, and contracting with community organisations has been managed with a dominant emphasis on short term cost management, which has meant that continuous improvement and innovation in social services has been undervalued. Because assessment and exchange of experience and information has been constrained at all levels,

³ The original estimated cost of the Clyde Dam was approximately \$120 million, but this blew out to nearly \$2 billion because of poor evaluation of earthquake risks at the site.

the sharing of systems, practices and operational processes across agencies has only been achievable in piecemeal ways. With or without institutional change, the sharing and accumulating experiences and knowledge of all in the social services system would be a valued and well used common resource across both public and community services, and underpin funding preferences. A focus on such information, if driven centrally, would be a key lever to manage the dysfunction in policy selection and operational practice we now experience.

Citizen focused services versus citizen-specific delivery

Citizen-centric services are those where the monitoring of the experiences of consumers is integral to the continuous improvement and evolution of service delivery. Citizen-specific services further depend on the ability to predict outcomes for specific individuals. The reliability of such predictions will determine whether it would be viable for the management of an individual's anticipated long term service provision to be assigned to a community or market entity. To assess the long-term effectiveness of services, the future situation of currently targeted groups and of later cohorts needs to be forecast as groups age, where knowledge of expected outcomes can be provided by research and evaluation. There is an expectation now that information sources that are now accessible (including the IDI) could enable the future need for social services of some specific individuals to be predicted. Applying population level predictions to individuals cannot be done with any known reliability from statistical models, as they provide responses at an aggregate level for groups with similar characteristics. Relying on an individual's genetic characteristics is very different from such statistical or actuarial modelling.

The modelling of the lifetime liability that the government can assess will be incurred by any specific citizen through actuarial methods will therefore have varying relevance. Analytical models embrace just a small portion of the attributes of individuals that can influence outcomes, making their applicability in forecasting outcomes at an individual level much more limited compared to at the level of population group.

The social investment model is a structured approach to mapping the connections among funders, service providers and citizens. Staging the implementation of the social investment model will enable potential benefits to be obtained as the model is implemented, and as the impact of the limitations of the existing public management model become more transparent. A continuing strategic oversight capability will be critical to resolving existing uncertainties about the form of social investment that is adopted. Assumptions about the analytical capability in forecasting effectively the long-term outcomes for named individuals remain challengeable, as statistical modelling and genetic science continue to evolve rapidly here. It is not yet clear whether the existing quantitative information available to the state is sufficient for what would be required to validate how far evidence of causal effects on groups can be applied at an individual level.

Maori

The unique constitutional position of Maori creates an obligation to not only monitor the position of Maori but to respond to what is found. We have long known that the Maori population has different demographic characteristics, is spread differently around New Zealand and has different family and community structures through whanau and hapu. Maori still experience outcomes in health, education and employment that are outside the norm of those systems that deliver services. History has been to apply solutions that placed little importance on long term remedies relevant to the position of Maori or their place in their determination and application. As recognition of the constitutional obligations of the

state has risen, so to have the expectations that the distinct character of Maori would be more broadly recognised not only in policy but in its evaluation and monitoring. Maori and Pacific young people are now a large share of new entrants to the labour force. Were Maori and Pacific youth to obtain now the same range of educational and health outcomes as Pakeha, both these communities would see the market change their economic welfare and social strength to a degree that no public welfare system is ever likely. This is the return on the investment in obtaining comparable outcomes for all youth in New Zealand.

Social investment

The social investment model is the New Zealand government's response to a need to change its existing institutional models which until now have tended to focus on nationwide contracting with few providers. At the very least it is bringing greater transparency to many of the solutions we currently adopt for difficult issues faced by citizens, and where the welfare and protection from harm can be influenced by what government, the community, families and whanau can do. If it is like any past set of received wisdoms it will bring new blind spots in who we care for, and its trustworthiness will depend how far we are transparent in this.

The focus of social investment is to improve the future for people when they are known to be most vulnerable, by investing in tested solutions focused on long term outcomes, responsibility for which is clear to all in the social services system. Improving how the social services system operates will be the outcome. Social investment represents significant change for the sector and the agencies within it. It has several important features including its focus on the oversight of the system and on long term outcomes for population groups. The continuing experiences of the customer are to be monitored and put at the centre. Social investment proposes to manage the connections between a diverse range of providers that integrate them into a system where responsibility for outcomes is clear to all. It is an information-driven approach that has a strong focus on learning, and making improvements. It requires a markedly increased use of evidence and evaluation by people throughout the system.

A system view of investment – to make good investment decisions, decision-makers need to understand the nature of the problems they are trying to solve and the long-term shift in outcomes they are trying to achieve for whom, and how. Identifying the most appropriate solutions using information about what works for whom, when and where (e.g. in what part of the system; at what stage in the life-course) and at what cost will enable decisions to be made about where to invest. Independent monitoring and evaluation of investments will ensure that investments continue to be effective. Our expectations of what can be achieved need to consider:

- i. The practicalities of political life mean that governments will always face pressure to demonstrate concern and control over matters of public interest, so that responses in the form of policy and laws will not always have a relevant evidence base to draw on. Sometimes the evidence contradicts long held received wisdoms that have strong contemporary resonance, and the evidence itself is devalued. Institutions have been abandoned for these reasons. (Social research bureau 1936, public health commission 1993-1996).
- ii. How we frame matters counts. We do this in the selection of performance measures, where we choose to gather additional evidence, and how we challenge myths and past received wisdom. Family violence was long regarded as a private household matter, while the potential for institutional child abuse, or the abuse of adults in institutional settings was never considered important for much of our history.

- iii. Holding government to account in policy and delivery requires approaches relevant to the programme, and this is often constrained by an emphasis on easily measured fiscal balances rather than more difficult assessments of the influences on the wellbeing of each generation. What is measured is often not relevant to determining the worthwhileness of what has been done.
- iv. There is a need for robust standards of evidence that reflects the materiality of the issues under consideration. We have a great breadth of ways of obtaining evidence (RCT, judicial review, forensic review, continuous improvement, case studies, natural experiments, official statistics, models) and the means needs to fit the issue. However well it is done, the very necessary codification of evidence obscures some of the relevant variability within the population, because it is aggregate information that becomes the focus of analysis.
- v. Communication on what works is especially important where there are long term cross sectoral consequences, operational uncertainty, or a high risk of system failure high in harm protection. Without having a structured basis for the accumulation and exchange of experiences, the potential for innovation is diminished, and existing rigidities in the system will be reinforced rather than reduced, and will be quality likely to decline.
- vi. There are of networks implicit in all elements of social services, and their management requires recognition that the social services system is a complex network of organisations, most effectively connected by a focus on the experience of citizens. The implications for public trust, evaluation, information sharing and the capacity to innovate are given poor consideration, while citizens bear excessive transaction costs in making connections that would be more easily managed by the system itself.

Superu is well placed to provide leadership of several components and to contribute to others. Areas where independence of Superu is important to social investment are where:

- independent assurance is needed (e.g. effectiveness of an intervention)
- an impartial view is needed (e.g. where best to invest; how the system is performing)
- consistency of approach across the system is needed (e.g. common standards)
- an impartial broker is needed (e.g. engagement with providers and funders)
- a system-level view is required that might well challenge existing received wisdom (e.g. the accumulation of knowledge across different silos)

Of special interest to the community sector, Superu is jointly involved in building up a commonality of language, concepts and purpose, as well as practice, developing tools of relevance to Maori and Pacific communities that reflect New Zealand content, and tools for training, moving from face to face to on-line methods. We are building up case studies of evaluations, and preparing syntheses of these experiences.

Conclusion

Social investment in its various forms is dependent on developing and applying enriched information resources as the key to the transformation of the social services system in New Zealand. Superu provides products and services to help decision-makers gain a system-level view of investment, to make it happen on the ground, and to contribute to system oversight. When a system wide, long-term lens is placed over many agency-managed programmes we find have a need to reframe existing outcomes and rethink performance

measures that are just agency based, and recognise the greater need for modelling and data analysis. This already apparent in family violence and child protection, as well as youth mental health.

The place of evaluation will continue to be constrained by the inevitable need of Ministers to advance policy founded on a limited evidence base, because the expectations of Ministerial decisiveness inherent in our political system. In the absence of evidence, policy has a bias towards sanctions, rules and penalties, and often the defence of partly informed policy responses is dependent on disavouring further evaluation or evidence gathering, rather than recognising the need to stimulate deeper thinking. “Three strikes and you’re out” exemplifies this. Standards of evidence need to be set as a matter of policy, determining minimum levels of baseline data and evaluation methods for all programmes.

There are tremendous opportunities to share information across the social services. In public administration in both Australia and New Zealand there is a strong tradition of gathering the minimal information needed to obtain access to a service, and this was reinforced by the statutory constraints that the Privacy Act 1993 was judged to place on practice in many fields, often counterintuitively to the detriment of citizens. National culture and organisational practice may change more slowly than statutes, and strong leadership in this will need to emerge from the public sector.

Whanau Ora is a major trail blazing initiative in respect to a networked service for whanau, but it has yet to receive the full commitment of the mix of agencies (and others) that are essential to realising the full potential of its participants. Recognition that the distinct nature of Maori social structures needs to be understood and recognised has been slow across social service departments. As part of the Ngai Tahu Treaty Settlement, the iwi is developing a plan to transition delivery of social services to the Ngai Tahu over a 40 year period. It is likely that other post settlement iwi are following and are likely to adopt a similar approach.

Governments of all shades have sought to prevent the holders of public funds having any right to draw on their experiences to challenge fundamental thinking, cutting out those not intimate with any service from becoming aware of alternative views, and reducing the likelihood of policy evolution and innovation. In a small country, people have many hats, and we need better ways of using all the knowledge we can bring to bear.

The self-referencing performance assessment now well embedded in public sector practices has been challenged by recent events and reviews, but its evolution into a strong citizen focused system of evaluation will require good intentions to be matched by the development of skills, resources and a managerial mindset at all levels in the public service. It should lead to fewer reputation damaging calamities of the sort seen in Havelock North, MPIE, Corrections and CYPS for example, but it will require those in the political system and the media to regard more frequent and early exposure of practices that are just not good enough as business as usual, and recognise when this is not so.

If we do not take advantage of the opportunity to now rethink the basic elements of our social services system, any diminishment of the foundations of trust among participants and citizens may well generate more rules, sanctions and penalties, and greater loss to the next generation. Being consistent in applying aspirations for bettering lives and ensuring that the system operates with the autonomy needed to face up to the differences among us are critical underpinnings of any reshaping of the social services that must be reinforced in evaluation practice.

This whakatauki is well understood but we need to remind ourselves of its importance;

He aha te mea nui o tea o

He tangata, he tangata, he tangata

No reira

Ka mutu taku mahi mo tenei wa

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena tatau katoa.

ⁱ <http://www.productivity.govt.nz/sites/default/files/sub-social-services-109-john-angus-96Kb.pdf>