

Submission on the Families Commission Amendment Bill

'Children and Young People as Social Actors' Research Cluster, University of Otago

We are in favour of the proposal to restructure the Families Commission so that it comprises a single Families Commissioner, and other members. This seems to us to be more consistent with the structure of the Office of the Children's Commissioner, and we believe that it will offer a more efficient and co-ordinated approach.

We are in favour of the retention of the advocacy function for the Families Commission and the production of an annual Families Status Report on the well-being of families. We are concerned, however, that the removal of the whole of the previous clause 8 describing advocacy functions, is to be replaced by a section describing the monitoring, evaluating and research function. We believe that it is important to retain an advocacy function that is supported by high quality research.

We are not in favour of the proposal to give the Commission an additional function of providing independent monitoring and evaluation of research in the social sector, particularly in light of the structure of the Commission and the proposed new Social Science Experts Panel (New Section 18C). The monitoring and evaluation of research on the well-being of families should be independent of government as governments, regardless of political persuasion, are likely to have vested political interests and motives, concerning the nature, management and control of research. We believe that the proposed system reduces the independence of the Families Commission (and other) researchers from government control, and is likely to constrain and narrow the focus of research in the social science sector. It is important that a much wider range of stakeholders and multidisciplinary experts is involved in commissioning and managing research, and that monitoring and evaluation of research be free of government control.

We are opposed to the new sections 18B and 18C, establishing a new Social Science Expert panel to provide academic peer review of research and evaluation. The Panel is to be

appointed on the recommendation of the Minister and the Minister's Chief Science Advisor, again leaving the process vulnerable to political interference and control of research that would undermine the value of the high quality research envisaged. The government seeks robust research that is responsive to a diverse range of families and contributes to both national and international developments in the social science sector. This requires that the proposed panel be independent of government control. To understand the broader experiences and interests of families in New Zealand, the panel will require knowledge and expertise that incorporates the diverse multidisciplinary and multimethod research approaches commonly utilised in family-related research internationally.

We think that it is important to have high quality, peer-reviewed research and an evidence-base for social science policies, but find it difficult to see how the Bill's proposed mechanisms will encourage this. Good quality research is needed, but based on a wide definition of what constitutes 'evidence', including multiple method research – quantitative and summative approaches, as well as qualitative and formative evaluation. Qualitative approaches are appropriate for investigating complex issues, and they are responsive to the diverse experiences and needs of families and agencies. Such research helps government understand the impact of programmes and interventions on child, youth and adult participants. Qualitative research also has the capacity to illustrate the multiple and complex ways in which communities are affected by policy and service delivery changes.

There is already plenty of research and academic reviewing expertise in New Zealand – for example, in the Medical Research Council, and the Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Panels, as well as universities and research units. We recommend that the Families Commission develop partnerships with these other research agencies and centres, rather than remain separate. This would lead to a more diverse and co-ordinated approach to key research issues. It would draw on the wide range of existing expertise and enable the social science research agenda for families to be comprehensive, culturally appropriate and responsive to existing and emerging challenges.

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