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# Engaging Children and Young People in the Policy Process

## lessons learned from the development of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

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### Abstract

Policy is improved when those most affected are involved in the policy development process. This article describes the approach taken by the Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki – Ministry for Children to engaging children and young people in the development of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, a cross-government initiative designed to drive action on child and youth wellbeing. It outlines key findings from the engagements and describes the impacts those insights had. It also identifies critical enablers of the project and key lessons learned.

We found the legislative changes which required children to be consulted and broader attitudinal changes towards involving children and young people in policymaking processes were key enablers. We found the project had a tangible impact not only on the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy itself, but also for the children and young people involved and their communities, and on attitudes towards children and young people's voices in general. We hope successive governments will continue to engage with children and young people to measure progress on child and youth wellbeing against what they have said matters most to them.

**Keywords** children's participation, youth participation, voice, wellbeing, engagement, children

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Policy is improved when those most affected are involved in the policy development process. For the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, this means listening to the views of children and reflecting those views in the design of a system that is focused on improving their outcomes.

The concept of wellbeing is a popular issue in policy conversations at present, but it is an intangible concept and can be difficult to precisely define. When staff at the Office of the Children's Commissioner reviewed existing literature and heard from children and young people to come up with a working definition of child wellbeing in 2017, they concluded that child wellbeing is dependent on the wellbeing of the child's family and whānau, that it is equally important for children's lives in the present as it is for their development into future adults, and, critically, that it needs to be considered in discussion with children and young people themselves (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2017). From the moment the New Zealand government signalled its intent to develop a strategy to promote the wellbeing of children and young people, it was clear that detailed engagement with children and young people would be required.

This article describes the project that came about when the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet partnered with the Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki to enable children and young people's views and experiences to inform the development of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, a new cross-government policy initiative designed to drive action on child and youth wellbeing. In late 2018 more than 6,000 children and young people were asked for their views on what a good life means to them. These views were summarised in the report *What Makes a Good Life? Children and young people's views on wellbeing*, released in February 2019 (Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki, 2019). This article describes the approach taken to engaging with children and young people, key findings from the engagement, and the impacts it had on policy, children and young people and their communities. It also identifies critical enablers of the project and key lessons learned.

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### Factors that led to children and young people's views being included in the development of the strategy

Two key shifts were significant in enabling children and young people's voices to shape the strategy.

#### *Increased political support for listening to children*

Attitudes towards children and young people's involvement in policymaking processes have shifted significantly in recent years. The voices of children and young people in care were a central part of the review of Child, Youth and Family and the creation of Oranga Tamariki (Fitzmaurice, 2017). A youth advisory group was established by the minister of education, Chris Hipkins, in 2017 to inform the reform of the education system (Ministry of Education 2017). The prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, has spoken at length about the importance of children and young people having a voice in decisions that affect them (Ardern, 2018a,

2018b) and both the previous minister for children, Anne Tolley, and the current minister, Tracey Martin, have shown a commitment to listening to children and young people.

This shift in political support was influenced by ongoing international pressure from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child as well as advocacy within Aotearoa New Zealand. The committee noted in its concluding observations in both 2011 and 2016 that the views of children in New Zealand are not adequately respected, that children do not have the means to express their views in the public domain and that their views are not systematically considered in the formulation of laws and policies (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2011, paras 26–7, 2016, para 18). The committee had repeatedly urged New Zealand to pass a national strategy for children, incorporating children's views.

In New Zealand, the children's commissioner's Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty included children's views within its 2012 report, and one of the key messages was that children and young people want to be involved in the solutions to child poverty and can provide unique perspectives (Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty, 2012). The Office of the Children's Commissioner, in its submission on the Child Poverty Reduction Bill, advocated strongly for children's voices to be included in the policy development process (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2018).

The combination of direct advocacy to decision makers, the sharing of children's views in public submissions and international pressure led to increased support for children's voices from decision makers, and an environment supportive of children's views being included in the development of the strategy.

#### *Legislative change required consultation with children*

The second key shift was a change in legislation. For the first time in New Zealand law, amendments in 2018 to the Children's Act 2014 introduced a requirement for children and young people to be consulted in the development

and ongoing implementation of a child and youth wellbeing strategy (s6D(1)(a)). This provision, along with the requirement that the responsible minister consult the Children's Commissioner (s6D(1)(b)), were the initial legislative impetus for this engagement project. As with the shift in attitudes towards children's voices, this legislative change was influenced by increased political support and sustained advocacy efforts by children's rights advocates, both internationally and within New Zealand.

The combination of these factors created the environment where a project like this was possible. The shift in attitudes towards children's voices may not, on its own, have been enough to ensure children's views were meaningfully included within the policy process. Similarly, legislative change may not have been possible without the concurrent shift in attitudes. It was the combination of these factors, more than one of them alone, which influenced the shape, scope and impact of this project.

#### Engagement approach

A mixed-methods research approach was used to engage with more than 6,000 children and young people across the country. An online survey was completed by 5,631 children and young people in primary, intermediate and secondary schools, as well as alternative education providers. These schools were all part of the Office of the Children's Commissioner's Mai World network, a network of schools whose students regularly complete similar surveys. The survey was also made available on the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet website. Overall, the survey reached a diverse group of children and young people across New Zealand, with a mix of urban/rural, socio-economic, ethnicity and age characteristics.

The survey included closed-ended questions with defined choices (age, ethnicity etc.), open-ended free text questions, questions that asked participants to rank from a list, and questions that required participants to indicate their level of agreement with statements. It asked children and young people what having a good life means to them, whether they are experiencing a good life right now, and what can be done to help all children and

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young people in New Zealand to have a good life. Children were also able to share their 'big ideas' directly with the prime minister by sending her a postcard. More than 1,000 children, young people and adults sent postcards to the prime minister.

In addition to the survey, 423 children and young people were spoken with face to face through a series of focus groups and one-on-one and paired interviews. The face-to-face conversations explored in more depth what it means to have a good life, what gets in the way and what helps. Prompting questions and appropriate activities encouraged children and young people to think about what having a good life means to them personally, what it means for the people around them, and what it means in relation to the places and communities they are part of. All were asked what they thought would make things better for children and young people now, and for their future.

The face-to-face conversations were targeted to ensure that the participants included those likely to be experiencing challenges in their lives. This included children and young people living in poverty, living in state care, with a disability, from rural and isolated areas, with refugee backgrounds, who identify as LGBTIQ+,

who are recent migrants, or who have received a mental health diagnosis. The majority of children and young people we spoke with in focus groups and interviews were Māori.

Overall, 6,053 children and young people participated in the project: 53% identified as female and 41% as male; 1% identified as gender diverse and a further 5% preferred not to list their gender. Ages for survey respondents ranged from seven to 18 years, while face-to-face participants included babies (with their parent(s)) and pre-school children right through to young adults. Further details on participant characteristics, including ethnicity and locations, are included in the full report.

Conversations with children and young people were organised through the Office of the Children's Commissioner's community partners (mostly NGOs, including alternative education providers and iwi social services) and Oranga Tamariki sites. Community partners and Oranga Tamariki sites were involved from the outset, supporting us to engage with children and young people in a way that would work for them. The project was jointly resourced by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, Oranga Tamariki and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

#### Key findings from the engagement

*Through the online surveys we heard that most children and young people are doing well, but some are facing challenges*

The survey asked children and young people to respond to a series of 17 statements relating to their wellbeing, such as 'I have a warm, dry place to live', 'I feel safe in my neighbourhood' and 'I can cope when life gets hard'. The majority of responses to all 17 statements were positive, indicating that most children and young people are doing okay.

However, some children and young people indicated that they were facing challenges. Around 10% responded negatively to four or more of the 17 statements and around 2% responded negatively to ten or more statements. This group is growing up in very challenging circumstances.

When asked an open-ended question about what a good life means, the most common responses related to having fun and feeling contented, having supportive family and friends and having basic needs met. Other responses related to being healthy (including mentally healthy), feeling safe, having a good education and feeling valued and respected.<sup>1</sup>

*Being with your family, even if they're annoying the heck out of you. They are immediate, speed dial no.1. – Rangatahi from Matamata*

*Being surrounded by loved ones and friends that support me and provide me with opportunities. – 17-year-old New Zealand European, Māori*

*Money may not be the key to happiness but it is the key to living and I know many people who struggle. – 17-year-old girl*

When asked what they saw as the top three most important things for children and young people to have a good life, the items most frequently selected (from a defined list) were:

- parents or caregivers have enough money for basic stuff like food, clothes and a good house to live in;
- children and young people have good relationships with family and friends;
- children and young people are kept safe from bullying, violence or accidents;
- children and young people are valued and respected for who they are.

*There were five key messages from the focus groups and interviews*

From the children and young people we met with in person we heard five key messages:

*Accept us for who we are and who we want to be*

Children and young people told us that they want to be accepted, valued and believed in and they want people to support their hopes for the future.

*To be accepted. To be understood and taken seriously. It's important because it gives you confidence in your uniqueness. – young person from Whangārei*

## Whānau are a critical factor in children and young people's wellbeing.

*Life is really hard for some of us*

Many children and young people face significant challenges, such as racism, bullying, discrimination, judgement, violence, drugs and a feeling of continually being let down.

*At our school people find mocking Māori culture to be a joke. 'Māoris go to prison', or 'Māoris do drugs'. – Rangatahi from Auckland*

*Something I always have to deal with at school is the stigma. When people find out you're a foster kid they're like 'oh you're an orphan, whose house did you burn down'. – 16-year-old girl living in state care*

*To help us, help our whānau and our support crew*

Whānau are a critical factor in children and young people's wellbeing. In general, for children and young people to be well, their whānau, friends and communities must also be well. Wellbeing is about relationships, not just about having things.

*If the parents are good then the kids are good. – Rangatahi from Rotorua*

*We all deserve more than just the basics*

Children and young people want 'the basics', such as a home, an education and a safe community. But they want more than just a minimum standard of living, and they want the systems that support them to be inclusive, accessible and affordable.

*Enough for the basics, plus a little bit more. – young person from Dunedin*

*How you support us matters just as much as what you do*

Efforts to support children and young people will not be effective if the sole focus is on what needs to be delivered. How supports are delivered matters just as much. Services must accept children and young people for who they are and respect their critical relationships with their whānau and communities.

*Having a good life isn't necessarily about the materialistic things. I think having strong friendships/relationships with people who genuinely care about you contributes better to a good life. – Rangatahi from Taumarunui*

### Impacts of the engagement

The project had a tangible impact not only on the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy itself, but also for the children and young people we engaged with and their communities, and on broader attitudes towards inclusion of children and young people in policymaking processes.

*Children and young people's voices influenced the strategy*

The impact of children and young people's views on the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy can be traced by comparing the outcomes proposed in the May 2018 draft version of the strategy (Office of the Minister for Child Poverty Reduction and Office of the Minister for Children, 2018, appendix B) with the final outcomes for the strategy confirmed in the August 2019 strategy framework (Child and Youth Wellbeing, 2019b). For example, the final version of the strategy has an additional domain relating to children and young people being accepted, respected and connected, reflecting the insight that was heard from children, 'Accept us for who we are and who we want to be'.

Key concepts within the strategy were also broadened, or the language used to describe those concepts modified, to better reflect children and young people's views. For example, in the draft framework one of the indicators under the 'Safety' domain was that 'Whānau and homes are safe and nurturing'. In comparison, the equivalent indicator within the final strategy refers to 'family/whānau wellbeing'. This better

reflects what children and young people said was important, as it was not just that they wanted to be safe within their whānau, but that they wanted their whānau to be well also. The wording of this domain also shifted from ‘Safety’ in the draft version to ‘Children and young people are loved, safe and nurtured’ in the final version, reflecting the message from children and young people that feeling safe is not just about physical safety, and cannot be separated from being loved and feeling emotionally safe and supported.

The processes used to engage with children and young people influenced the development of the strategy more broadly. The approach taken to consultation with adults as part of the broader strategy development was influenced by the approach taken to engagement with children and young people, and the insights from children and young people influenced the questions asked of adults in later parts of the consultation (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019). The influence of the child and youth engagement process on the subsequent adult engagement process gave weight and credibility to the former and positioned children and young people’s voices at the centre of the process.

#### *Children and young people benefitted from the opportunity to participate*

Previous research has identified that the benefits for children and young people of involving them in decisions can include increased self-esteem and pride (Thomas and Percy Smith, 2012) as well as enhanced sense of agency and self-advocacy skills (Thomas et al., 2017). This would appear to be the case for children and young people who participated in this research, some of whom told us that this was the first time they had been asked for their opinion on these sorts of issues by a group of adults. They appreciated the opportunity to share what they thought and said it should happen more often. From the children and young people’s perspectives, the opportunity to share their views directly with the prime minister was unique and valued. Knowing that children and young people’s views would be taken seriously by decision makers

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meant that the project team were able to assure children and young people that taking the time to share their opinions would be worthwhile.

For some children and young people, the focus groups organised as part of this project provided an impetus for ongoing advocacy focused on effecting change in their communities. For example, one group of young people in Taupō decided to continue meeting after the initial engagement event. They now meet regularly and have advocated for issues such as awareness of mental health challenges and suicide prevention initiatives.

Some young people appreciated the opportunity to come together with other young people in similar circumstances, many for the first time. For example, a group of young people in care whom we met with in Dunedin shared that they enjoyed meeting other young people facing similar challenges.

#### *National engagement prompted community-led conversations and actions*

The project prompted ongoing conversations within communities in some of the areas we visited. In Kaitaia, a group called Amazing Engagers was established after our visit, supported by the Kaitaia REAP (Rural Education Activities Programme) organisation.<sup>2</sup> The Amazing Engagers group put together a programme inviting people into the classroom to hear young people’s stories. In Tairāwhiti the community groups we partnered with have recognised the need to listen to the voices of the young people they work with, and ensure that those voices are heard by local decision makers. They are now in the process of establishing processes and mechanisms to support this. These are just small examples of initiatives prompted by the project. Each is locally focused and locally led, but a national engagement project provided the impetus for their creation.

#### *Children and young people are increasingly seen as key stakeholders in the policy process*

In addition to the impacts for the children and young people who took part in the project, the community groups we partnered with and the strategy itself, there were also impacts on broader attitudes to children and young people’s voices. Research has found that involving children and young people in decision making can contribute to a culture shift which can legitimise children and young people’s participation and change the way they are viewed (Thomas et al., 2017). Projects such as this one can also have impacts on children as a consumer group. This can include demonstrated evidence of the value of hearing from children in policy development and future changes to legislation to better enable children’s participation (Kilkelly, 2019).

Across government, children and young people are increasingly seen as key stakeholders whose views are an important aspect of policy development. This is evidenced by ‘a marked increase in the interest of agencies in seeking out views of children’ (Children’s Convention Monitoring Group, 2019, p.19). It has been suggested that a ‘participation ecosystem’

is required to make children's participation in decision making meaningful (Fitzmaurice, 2017), and it is encouraging that elements of this ecosystem seem to be developing in New Zealand. It is hoped that the experiences and outcomes of this project will contribute to this participatory ecosystem, providing support for similar projects and initiatives in the future.

#### Lessons for engaging children and young people in the policy process

Based on our experience, we have distilled three key lessons for others interested in engaging children and young people in the policy process in the future.

*Children and young people's views often challenge adult assumptions and ongoing engagement is required to measure progress against what matters most to children and young people*

The children and young people we spoke with offered views that challenged policymakers' understandings and articulations of wellbeing. For example, young people consistently talked about their wellbeing being closely linked to that of their family and whānau. Young people also identified the importance of being accepted and respected for their overall wellbeing, indicating that this was a necessary condition to achieve progress in other areas. This wider view of relational wellbeing and the high level of importance attached to acceptance and respect did not always align with the narrow parameters initially proposed by policymakers.

Children and young people's different views and understandings of key concepts such as wellbeing can present a challenge to policymaking processes, as these broader understandings are not always easy to articulate and measure (particularly where there hasn't been previous policy work). While it is positive to note changes made to the strategy in response to children and young people's feedback, challenges remain for government in terms of how progress against these more holistic concepts of wellbeing can be monitored. Some of the current indicators identified in the strategy to measure progress on outcomes fall short of capturing the nature of wellbeing described by the children and young people who took part in this project. For

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example, the use of the percentage of young people enrolled to vote and voting in the general election as a proxy for measuring how well children and young people's voices, perspectives and opinions are listened to and taken into account (Child and Youth Wellbeing, 2019a) provides a limited view of this 'voice' outcome, given that most of the children and young people for whom the strategy is intended aren't old enough to vote and voting is only one way for young people to share their views and opinions.

In one sense this is understandable, as the strategy must use the best measures currently available. However, it is also a reminder of the importance of ongoing engagement with children and young people in order to develop policy that truly reflects their views. Successive governments will need to continue to engage with children and young people in order to measure progress in the area of child and youth wellbeing against what children and

young people have said matters most to them.

*Community relationships are an essential part of seeking children and young people's views*

Perhaps the most crucial factor in the extent to which we were able to engage with a wide range of children and young people was the involvement of community partners and Oranga Tamariki sites. Community partners and sites helped organise the workshops and focus groups, enabling the project to engage with those who might not otherwise have been able to participate and ensuring tailored engagement approaches that worked well for the young people. In particular, the engagements through community partners were community led, which made a significant difference to who we were able to speak with, how we were able to engage and the impact that the process had afterwards. Reciprocity is key in these relationships, and it was important to report back to the children, young people and communities we engaged with about what we heard and the strategy itself.

*Buy-in at the highest level makes a big difference to both successful engagements and the impact of children and young people's voices on policy decisions*

In many projects seeking children and young people's views it can be hard to guarantee exactly how their views will be taken into account. For those engaging with them, we can always promise that we will do everything within our power to ensure their voices are heard, but we can never guarantee what other factors will influence final decisions. However, in this case we knew that children and young people's views would be heard directly by the prime minister and the minister for children, as well as other senior decision makers.

Being able to guarantee that children and young people's voices would be heard at the highest level added to the legitimacy of the project and created an enthusiasm for children and young people to share views with us. It also created buy-in from the community partners who helped us deliver the engagements, where the high profile of the strategy meant that the

opportunity to support young people to be involved in this project was well received in communities. Interestingly, it was the assurance that children and young people's views would be shared with the prime minister that appeared to drive enthusiasm to be part of the project, rather than any specific assurance about exactly how children and young people's views would affect the final decisions.

## Conclusion

The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy is expected to have a long-term impact on government policy for children, young people and their families. Encouragingly, the legislation that initiated the strategy includes an ongoing obligation to consult

with children and young people. This means that large-scale engagements seeking children and young people's views may become increasingly common in future. Policymakers may wish to utilise the methods and tools used in this project for similar processes in the future.

The anecdotal examples we provide suggest that including children and young people's views in policymaking can have impacts not just on policy but also on children and young people themselves, on their communities and on broader attitudes towards children and young people's voices. Future projects of this type could attempt to measure these suggested impacts more systematically. Future engagements should consider building on

the success of this project by taking a more explicitly rights-based approach to including children's views in policymaking (Byrne and Lundy, 2019). This will help enable children and young people to meaningfully influence policy and help policymakers ensure that their views are taken into account. Future iterations of the strategy will provide opportunities to test, refine and build on what we've learned.

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1 All quotations in this section are from the 'Findings' section of the What Makes a Good Life? report (Office of the Children's Commissioner and Oranga Tamariki, 2019).

2 REAP organisations are non-governmental organisations which deliver educational and family support programmes in rural areas across the country.