

Response: Independent Children's Monitor

Response from Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children to the first focused review of Aroturuki Tamariki – Independent Children's Monitor: Returning Home From Care: An in-depth look into the experiences and practices surrounding tamariki and rangatahi cared for at home while in State custody

August 2023

Response to first thematic report of the Independent Children’s Monitor

Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children (Oranga Tamariki) welcomes the first thematic report from Aroturuki Tamariki – Independent Children’s Monitor (the Monitor) into the experiences and practices surrounding tamariki and rangatahi cared for at home while in State custody.

Overview

Oranga Tamariki helps to ensure all tamariki and rangatahi are in loving whānau and communities where oranga tamariki can be realised. All of our leaders, kaimahi, strategic iwi partners, service providers and caregiving whānau play an important part in achieving this vision.

Our focus remains on supporting tamariki and rangatahi to be in safe, flourishing homes and communities. Equally, we are committed to ensuring rangatahi leaving care, or youth justice, get a good start to their adult lives.

Alongside our own self-monitoring, which is maturing over time, regular reporting and monitoring by the Monitor is a key part of making sure Oranga Tamariki fulfils its commitment to meeting the wellbeing needs of tamariki and rangatahi in our care and making sure those needs are championed across the children’s sector. In preparing their first thematic report, the Monitor met with Oranga Tamariki staff, gathered data and information about us, and visited two communities to meet with tamariki and rangatahi in our care, their whānau and caregivers, and other professionals that support our work.

We value the independent view that the Monitor provides, the measures of accountability they hold us to, and their focus on supporting Oranga Tamariki to provide quality care that meets the needs of tamariki and rangatahi. The findings and insights from the Monitor’s report will be used to support ongoing continuous improvement that focuses on enhancing the quality of care for tamariki and rangatahi, and our support for their whānau and caregivers.

In addition, the Monitor plays an important role in identifying improvements required across the Oranga Tamariki system as a whole, in order to ensure tamariki in care are able to consistently access the supports necessary to meet their full range of needs. We welcome findings and recommendations made by the Monitor which emphasise the need for other agencies to provide greater support and collaboration to meet the needs of tamariki in care.

Findings

The Monitor has detailed their key findings, which are drawn from data provided by Oranga Tamariki, and from their monitoring visits to two communities.

1. Oranga Tamariki social workers do not have clear guidance on when custody orders are removed, or when less coercive powers are preferred, and this lack of guidance is reflected in regional variations in the duration that orders remain in place.
2. Oranga Tamariki data on the success of tamariki returning or remaining home is limited, and this reduces opportunities for Oranga Tamariki to understand what is working well and where there are areas of risk.
3. Planning is important to the success of a return home, however Oranga Tamariki data shows that almost half are unplanned.
4. While policy recommends that tamariki returned home are visited every week for the first four weeks, data from Oranga Tamariki for 2021/2022 showed that only 19 percent of children who returned home were visited weekly for the first month after the transition.

Unplanned returns home were also visited less frequently in the first four weeks, than planned returns (75 percent of planned returns received at least one visit in the first four weeks, compared to 63 percent for unplanned).

5. Support from the wider social sector for tamariki and rangatahi, and their whānau was varied, with communication, collaboration and funding raised as barriers to success.
6. Inconsistent government policies and practice was identified as a barrier to a successful return home. We heard about uncoordinated policy and practice between Oranga Tamariki and Kāinga Ora in particular, which lead to delays in parents receiving the right support or in accessing a suitable, stable home so their children can return.

Response to key findings

Oranga Tamariki accept the findings made by the Monitor. We agree that a return of a child to a care situation from which they have been previously removed due to actual or potential harm requires careful consideration and planning. It also requires other agencies to work closely with Oranga Tamariki in order to ensure parents and whānau have the range of supports needed to create an environment for tamariki to be cared for in a way that is safe and supported.

The Monitor has identified a number of practical measures that Oranga Tamariki will progress to provide greater clarity and support for our staff in working with children who remain at home or are returning home. The Monitor has also made findings which will require support from other agencies and which we will take forward through discussions with our government partners. It is also important to acknowledge that the reasons for tamariki coming into and remaining in care are complex and often involve a range of factors and require a range of solutions. This response therefore needs to be seen in the broader context of work that Oranga Tamariki is leading in relation to the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan and the Future Direction Plan.

Oranga Tamariki have worked with the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) to respond to the Monitor's findings and their information is included in this response.

1. **Oranga Tamariki social workers do not have clear guidance on when custody orders are removed, or when less coercive powers are preferred, and this lack of guidance is reflected in regional variations in the duration that orders remain in place.**
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Our policy '*Ensuring a safe, stable, and loving home for tamariki in care*' requires that we must achieve a permanent care arrangement for tamariki and rangatahi at the earliest opportunity. By definition (with a few minor exceptions) this includes the requirement that the custody orders in favour of the Oranga Tamariki Chief Executive are discharged as a part of this process.

We agree with the Monitor that further work is needed to strengthen our policy and guidance so that we are clear about this requirement and the processes being applied for tamariki and rangatahi who are in a return home or remain home placement type.

Providing greater clarity to Oranga Tamariki practitioners about decisions regarding the discharge of custody is likely to make some contribution towards more timely outcomes for tamariki in care. As there are a range of reasons children may remain in care, undertaking these steps will not, in and of itself, fully address the issue of regional variation.

What we will do

We are currently developing new policy and supporting guidance specifically to inform and support kaimahi who are working to return tamariki and rangatahi to their parent or usual carer. This new work will reflect our practice approach including whānau and family led decision-making and planning with the voices of tamariki and rangatahi at the centre.

The policy will provide direction and guidance on deciding when to discharge orders, legal considerations including the use of services and support orders, the application of the National Care Standards to tamariki and rangatahi in remain home and return home placement types, and the length, breadth and quality of support provided to tamariki and rangatahi and their whānau and family to ensure that the transition home is successful and sustainable.

2. Oranga Tamariki data on the success of tamariki returning or remaining home is limited, and this reduces opportunities for Oranga Tamariki to understand what is working well and where there are areas of risk.

Oranga Tamariki recognise the need to continue to improve sources of data and information that can support decision making for children in care.

Oranga Tamariki recording systems do not easily allow us to capture or extract certain types of information that would be helpful to understand trends, and measure outcomes for tamariki and rangatahi. A significant amount of information is currently recorded in free text fields and cannot be extracted without manual case file analysis.

In the proposed work to upgrade our technology systems is the need and ability to measure:

- more complex data like the numbers of tamariki who enter a return home placement and are subsequently removed from the care of their parents or usual caregivers; and
- whether visits to tamariki in a return or remain home placements occur at the frequency agreed to in their plan.

In the interim, methods such as case file analysis and research projects, have enabled us to gather a number of insights into what is working well, areas for further focus and improvement, and where there is risk of harm to tamariki and rangatahi.

The importance of good information to support decision making cannot be understated, particularly when working across agencies to inform best practice approaches and to identify and address areas that require solutions.

Where tamariki are in a safe and supported care arrangement with their parents or whānau, there can be a range of barriers to discharging orders which may result in tamariki remaining in the custody of the Chief Executive longer than is necessary. This can be due to the complex needs and the nature of concerns however other barriers include:

- variation in timeframes in which applications for discharge of Court orders are able to be considered
- concerns about the loss of support if Oranga Tamariki discharge custody
- differing perspectives amongst professionals about the length of time required in order to evidence sustained whānau change
- social workers often have to prioritise work with tamariki who are currently in unsafe or unstable care situations rather than those whose care arrangements are considered safe

Our focus is on working with our partners, to continue to identify and address these barriers. Oranga Tamariki continues to work collaboratively with community sites and legal stakeholders to progress outcomes for children transitioning into the safe long-term care of their parents or whānau.

Progress

Work is underway to transform the Oranga Tamariki technology systems. The Frontline Technology Systems Upgrade project is a significant undertaking in terms of time, resourcing and investment.

Investing in significant changes to our current case management systems will only achieve benefits for a limited duration before the case management system is replaced. In the interim, Oranga Tamariki gathers insights about matters recorded in unstructured data through research investigating specific areas of interest.

Oranga Tamariki also uses case file analysis to report on measures and generate insights for data that is not recorded in a structured format, and therefore cannot be easily extracted and reported on. For example, case file analysis is used to report on regular quality engagement between an Oranga Tamariki practitioner and tamariki in care (an Appropriation Measure). Whilst case file analysis can provide a richer, deeper view of practice quality than structured data alone, it also requires a considerable investment of time and effort and because a manual review of case recording is required, results are not available in real time.

We are making good progress with our partners in reducing the need for tamariki to come into the care of Oranga Tamariki in the first place, and when they do, ensuring that they can be cared for by their parents and whānau at the earliest opportunity. There is a further opportunity in the work with our partners to prevent tamariki from remaining in the custody of the Chief Executive where their ongoing safety and wellbeing can be better supported by their community than by Oranga Tamariki.

What we will do

The Frontline Technology Systems Upgrade will explore how Oranga Tamariki improves the ability to capture and generate insights from the information recorded and the data this will generate, whilst recognising that digital systems need to be designed with best practice approaches, useability, and analytic functionality.

The Safety of Children in Care Team will complete case file analysis on a sample of cases where children have returned home, the custody order has subsequently been discharged, and there have been no further reports of concern received. We are in the process of scoping this work and anticipate it will give us insight into some of the critical success factors that support tamariki to return home safely.

We are working with Māori, Iwi, and community partners to support the discharge of custody orders. Current capability and capacity of these partners to support whānau varies across regions, and Oranga Tamariki will need to continue to prioritise supporting communities.

Partnered planning is needed to ensure a safe, stable, and loving home is provided at the earliest opportunity. Oranga Tamariki and our partners have a clear action plan and approach which includes:

- Engaging with the judiciary and counsel to communicate our intention for improved collaborative practice at the start of our work with tamariki and whānau.
- Intensive support services with our partners to prioritise supporting parents and whānau in this cohort.

- An increased focus across Oranga Tamariki sites and communities of practice to raise awareness and develop shared solutions for tamariki in whānau care or return or remain home placements.

Work is underway with each region to enhance processes to identify tamariki with a clear and safe pathway to discharge them from Oranga Tamariki custody, and to take action to progress the discharge.

3. Planning is important to the success of a return home, however Oranga Tamariki data shows that almost half are unplanned.

Planning is important and planned transitions generally have the best chance of long-term success. However, rangatahi will sometimes make their own decisions that can contribute to unplanned transitions, or transitions that occur earlier than had been anticipated.

‘Unplanned transitions’ is a term that is only used in the Care Standards Case File Analysis to denote a more urgent transition where there wasn’t an opportunity to plan before the transition took place. These transitions occur most often when tamariki and rangatahi make independent decisions to return home. Whilst older rangatahi may make their own decisions, it does not always mean it is a safe decision or a decision agreed by family or whānau. There is an added complexity of vulnerability, trauma, and risk that we need to consider when assessing tamariki and rangatahi needs during unexpected transitions. Engaging with tamariki and rangatahi and advocating for their participation in decision-making helps to ensure the best decisions and plans are being made. In 90 percent of planned transitions (i.e., those transitions that were known about in advance and where there was a reasonable opportunity for planning to occur), case file analysis found there was evidence that a planning meeting had taken place.

We also acknowledge our legislative responsibilities under section 5(1)(a) and section 11 of the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 to actively encourage tamariki and rangatahi to have reasonable opportunities to participate and express their views on any proceeding or process on matters affecting them, and in a way that is appropriate for their age, development, language and/or disability. Section 7AA also sets out our responsibility to improve outcomes for tamariki Māori and their whānau, hapū and iwi to understand and respond to their views and experiences.

Progress

Most Oranga Tamariki sites convene regular ‘Care Clinics’ or ‘Care Leadership hui’ that bring people together to focus on identifying tamariki and rangatahi who may be able to return home or transition to the care of whānau, and work together to remove barriers and support planning to enable this to happen successfully.

In 8 of 11 regions, Care Permanency Workers (a partnered role) are in place. These roles are dedicated to identifying and supporting tamariki and rangatahi to successfully transition out of care into safe, secure homes. In all cases, a safe return home or safe permanent care with whānau, hapu or iwi is prioritised.

A work programme started in November 2022 ‘Returning tamariki to parents, family or whānau’. Oranga Tamariki are supporting sites and regions to identify barriers to rangatahi and tamariki safely returning to the care of their whānau, and to remove these barriers where viable. A regional plan has been created in all 11 regions that has identified barriers and possible solutions. Common barriers include Family Court workload and timeframes, legal stakeholders seeking longer evidenced periods

of stability in care before supporting a return home, financial challenges for whānau associated with tamariki and rangatahi exiting care, disagreements within some whānau around permanent care, and workload challenges in Oranga Tamariki. Solutions put in place include the greater use of Care Clinics, training around access to financial support (including through the Permanent Care Support Service), greater monitoring and oversight of the transition planning at a regional level, and engagements with legal stakeholders. This work is ongoing.

Designing systems and practices to prepare for and respond to unplanned or unexpected transitions is just as important as supporting well planned transitions. Oranga Tamariki has specifically designed policy and processes to help ensure rangatahi are safe and supported in the case of unplanned transitions. The '*Unexpected transitions*' section of the '*Transitions within care*' policy advises that any steps outlined in the policy that we are unable to take before the transition, must be carried out as soon as we can after the move. In addition, the policy recognises how critical tamariki and rangatahi participation is for transition success by requiring their views to be considered as a part of our planning.

Ensuring that the voices of tamariki, rangatahi and whānau are heard is central to the success of planned and unplanned transitions home. We have recently revised the 'My Rights, My Voice' booklet, a resource that kaimahi can use with tamariki and rangatahi to explain their right and supports they can access while in care. This was updated and made available for use from September 2022.

What we will do

The 'Returning tamariki to parents, family or whānau' work programme remains underway, and this work will continue to support tamariki and rangatahi safely returning to the care of parents and whānau. There remain significant challenges to some tamariki and rangatahi safely exiting care. This includes the need to work towards aligned views between Oranga Tamariki and legal stakeholders around the right time for tamariki and rangatahi to exit care, building greater awareness amongst Oranga Tamariki staff and whānau around how to access financial and other supports, and further work with legal stakeholders to prioritise time to consider custody and discharge decisions.

Oranga Tamariki is currently developing a new policy and supporting guidance related to return home.

Building on our existing work to strengthen tamariki and rangatahi involvement in decisions that impact them, especially decisions around care or custody, we are developing a 'how to use' guide for the revised 'My Rights, My Voice' booklet. This is expected to be completed in late 2023.

4. While policy recommends that tamariki returned home are visited every week for the first four weeks, data from Oranga Tamariki for 2021/2022 showed that only 19 percent of children who returned home were visited weekly for the first month after the transition. Unplanned returns home were also visited less frequently in the first four weeks, than planned returns (75 percent of planned returns received at least one visit in the first four weeks, compared to 63 percent for unplanned).

The primary benefit of enhanced visiting and engagement is to ensure tamariki and whānau needs are understood and responded to, leading to greater wellbeing and stability. Planning with tamariki and whānau and frequently engaging with them during a return home are fundamentally important to successful outcomes. This may contribute a to reduction in duration of time in care, but it is not

the only determinant. There can be a variety of reasons that a return home can be 'unplanned' which are unique to the circumstances of the child or young person.

The guidance '*Returning children and young people safely home*' sets out our responsibility to the tamariki, rangatahi and whānau we work with to ensure that all kaimahi know and understand the importance of basing the frequency of our visits on the assessed need of te tamaiti or rangatahi. There is a particular focus on increasing the frequency of visiting in the first month after a transition home; this includes when rangatahi independently make the decision to return home. The policy recommends at least weekly visits for the first four weeks. The '*Transitions within care*' policy aligns with the National Care Standards and instructs that visiting frequency must be based on assessed need.

Development of plans that focus on the longevity of safe and supportive care rely on a network of people both whānau and professionals who support tamariki and rangatahi and have additional oversight of their care and wellbeing. We acknowledge that the Monitor found examples of practice which fall significantly below the expectations we hold.

Our core Practice Standards and our journey of embedding the Practice Framework are key to building trusting relationships. Effectively engaging family, whānau, hapū and iwi and those caring for tamariki is critical to ensuring tamariki have safe, stable, loving care at the earliest opportunity. Tamariki have told us that connecting them with their whakapapa is important to them, as it supports their sense of identity and belonging. Respecting whānau, hapū and iwi and putting time and effort into building trusting relationships helps whānau feel comfortable in giving their views and asking for help when they need it. It also means their needs are better understood and resources and supports are better able to be provided to strengthen the capability of whānau so they are better able to provide care effectively for their tamariki.

Supporting whānau to increase their participation in decision making is an important focus of engagement. As practitioners, we need to understand our own biases when working with whānau, hapū, iwi and caregivers, and consider ways to adjust the power dynamic in these relationships so they are supportive rather than threatening. This includes considering the cultural context and 'world view' of whānau and caregivers, and how they see their own lives and circumstances. For tamariki involved in offending, effectively engaging with victims is a key to their taking responsibility.

Progress

Visiting children and young people in care has been a strong organisational priority through 2023. Oranga Tamariki have recently introduced He Akoranga which is a whole of organisation fortnightly learning session based on key areas of practice. In March 2023 three sessions were held with a specific focus on engaging tamariki and rangatahi. This included a particular focus on engaging disabled tamariki and rangatahi and on building relationships with tamariki and rangatahi who may be reluctant to engage. This focussed on practical strategies that help build and maintain trusting relationships. In April 2023, funding was made available to enable social workers and youth workers to refresh tools and resources (such as books, craft materials and other activities) that they use to engage children and young people.

We have recently completed the analysis of our care standards self-monitoring findings for the 2022/23 year, including a focus on the frequency of visits and engagement with tamariki following an expected or unexpected return home. This data has indicated some improvement in practice in this area since the Monitor's review of our practice in 2022. Further action remains necessary to continue to strengthen visiting practice.

Oranga Tamariki has supported and enabled visiting tamariki and rangatahi in care, including those who have recently returned home or entered placements with whānau, through adopting tools to enhance visibility of need by staff. Whiti is a reporting tool that provides social workers with instant information to make it easier for them to better support tamariki, whānau and communities. By providing greater visibility of work underway, Whiti assists social workers to plan and prioritise critical tasks such as engaging with tamariki and rangatahi who have returned home from care within the appropriate timeframe and reviewing and updating plans. The roll-out of Whiti is now well underway across Oranga Tamariki.

Social Work workload can impact social worker capacity to regularly engage with tamariki and rangatahi following a return home from care. The Office of the Chief Social Worker has undertaken work to better understand case load sizes, and the relationship between case complexity and workload. The work brings together different strands of data and evidence.

What we will do

Building on the work to better understand caseloads, we are developing a case complexity model which is expected to measure the complexity level of tamariki and whānau within a Social Work case load. This will help with workforce planning and resource allocation. It will enable Oranga Tamariki to allocate work more effectively, somewhat alleviating workload pressures and ultimately supporting more timely quality engagement with tamariki and rangatahi. Testing of the statistical model will occur in September and refinements made in late 2023.

As part of our routine monitoring of the quality of practice with tamariki in care, we will continue to ensure a particular focus on the extent to which appropriate planning and support have been provided to tamariki who return home to their parent(s) or usual carers, including unexpected transitions home. This will enable us to monitor the impact of improvement actions, and identify any particular variations in practice across the country that need to be addressed.

In late 2023, we will implement a new Quality Practice Tool for site-based Practice Leaders to use to assess the quality of return home practice in their individual sites. This will enable them to lift the awareness of practice policy and guidance requirements when tamariki return home, to provide real-time feedback to practitioners, and to take action to address any gaps or areas for improvement in practice locally. We will ensure this tool includes an explicit focus on children being visited regularly by social workers when they return home, in line with existing policy.

The existing 'Returning tamariki to parents, family or whānau' work, and the review of the Return Home Policy are exploring concrete measures to help ensure visits to tamariki and rangatahi who have recently returned home take place in line with need. While this work remains underway, it is expected this will include specific requirements around recording the assessed need for visits, monitoring and more explicit expectations around the recording of visits that takes place. We will also seek to strengthen opportunities to work more collaboratively with those in iwi, Māori and community organisations who are often also engaged with these families, visiting regularly and providing additional support where children have returned home.

5. Support from the wider social sector for tamariki and rangatahi, and their whānau was varied, with communication, collaboration and funding raised as barriers to success. For example, long waiting lists for assessments and specialised support for parents, such as alcohol and drug counselling, and for tamariki, such as mental health or disability assessments, have an impact on parents and tamariki returning home or waiting to return home.
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Wider social sector support is vital if parents and whānau are to be enabled to continue to care for their tamariki or to resume this care if it has been interrupted. The timely provision of these supports and services can be fundamental as to whether and when a child can return home, and the extent to which that return home can be safely sustained.

In July 2022, the Minister for Children announced the first Oranga Tamariki Action Plan (the 'Action Plan'); a legislative requirement under the Children's Act 2014. The purpose of the Action Plan is to set out how the chief executives of children's agencies will work together to improve the well-being of the "core populations of interest" as defined in the Children's Act, and their shared responsibilities for achieving this.

Through the Action Plan, children's agencies are working collaboratively towards a place where:

- Tamariki, rangatahi and whānau with the greatest needs, get the help they need, when they need it, no matter where they live; experience a coordinated, unified approach in having their needs met; and know about the supports and services available to them, have confidence in using them, and believe their needs are being addressed and their views heard.
- Iwi and communities are enabled to provide tailored and flexible supports for tamariki and rangatahi and are supported and resourced to develop collective child wellbeing objectives and implement collaborative local prevention responses.
- Social workers, carers, and others who work with children and young people are able to access services and supports for the tamariki and rangatahi they are advocating for, in a timely way, and are able to collaborate across agencies and with whānau and local communities to pursue the best solutions for tamariki and rangatahi they work with.
- The children's system is a cohesive system where collaboration across agencies and with iwi and communities is the norm and is prioritised; has a good foundation of information sharing and is underpinned by evidence-based decision-making; and is equipped with effective policies, processes, structures, and tools to enable agencies to deliver good outcomes, and hold agencies accountable (individually and collectively).

Government agencies are committed to improving the mental health and wellbeing of tamariki and rangatahi involved with Oranga Tamariki. There are significant mental health and wellbeing initiatives underway which will both directly and indirectly contribute to the mental health and wellbeing of tamariki and rangatahi involved with Oranga Tamariki. We will continue to support these key initiatives.

Oranga Tamariki has been challenged in recent years to improve disability data and evidence in relation to disabled tamariki and rangatahi in care. We acknowledge that quality data and evidence is required to help improve outcomes for our disabled children and whānau.

Social workers, alongside all kaimahi working with whānau, need support from other agencies to do their job and build trust with children, young people, families, whānau, and communities. There needs to be good cross-agency relationships at the frontline. We are making a fundamental shift in our approach to practice within Oranga Tamariki. At the heart of this shift is the relationships we build with the tamariki, whānau, communities and partners we work with.

Progress

Since publishing the Action Plan, Child and Youth Wellbeing Ministers have agreed accountability arrangements to monitor and ensure that the children's agencies chief executives are held accountable for delivering its actions.

Oranga Tamariki has worked with other agencies to establish the relationships and connections needed to deliver the broader Action Plan and has also delivered on its own short-term actions, which are set out in the Action Plan's accompanying Implementation Plan, including:

- in-depth assessments of need in the areas of education, health and housing (Action Three),
- a Prototype Evidence and Indicators Dashboard (Action Four),
- involvement in the development of cross-agency responses to the in-depth assessments of need (Action Six); and
- advice to Ministers on initiating a review of the Gateway assessment process.

We have published our Disability Evidence Plan and guidance for Working with Disabled People on the Practice Centre. This contains all our practice policies, guidance, and tools for assessment of needs relating to any disability, working with disabled tamariki and the whānau or family who may need specialist out of home care, and working with disability, learning supports and ACC.

The Disability Evidence Plan broadly sets out work focus areas for the next two to five years. The Disability Evidence Plan supports our Disability Strategy and work programme. It will continue to be adapted as the Disability Strategy is further developed and we learn more through monitoring, data, research, evaluation activities and wider engagement.

The Disability Evidence Plan includes improvements to existing disability data prevalence measurement using CYRAS data and research to inform an improved disability data model.

There are current practice policies and guidance in place related to returning tamariki to the care of their parents or whānau or family. Oranga Tamariki has recognised that these need further clarification and strengthening. We are currently developing new policy and supporting guidance specifically to inform and support kaimahi who are working to restore tamariki and rangatahi to their parent or usual carer. This new work will reflect our practice approach including whānau and family led decision-making and planning with the voices of tamariki and rangatahi at the centre. This will provide direction and guidance on:

- deciding when to discharge orders
- legal considerations including the use of services and support orders
- application of care standards to tamariki and rangatahi in remain home/return home placement types,
- the length, breadth and quality of support provided to tamariki and rangatahi and their whānau and family to ensure that the transition home is successful and sustainable.

What we will do

We will work with Regional Public Service Commissioners on how they can help drive support for and engagement with the Action Plan and actions through regional leadership (agencies, iwi, local government and partners) to enable locally-led solutions.

We will provide the second six-monthly Action Plan implementation progress report to Child and Youth Wellbeing Ministers in September 2023, setting out what agencies have done to lift support to children and young people with the greatest needs. The latest version of the Evidence and Indicator

Dashboard will be provided with the report. The actions in the Action Plan and the Implementation Plan range from immediate activities, to work programmes that may span many years.

Cross-agency responses to the first tranche of in-depth assessments of need, delivered under Action 6 of the Action Plan, are publicly available on the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan website (www.orangatamarikiactionplan.co.nz). They set out detailed plans for how agencies will work together over the next six months to three years to address service gaps relating to:

- mental health and wellbeing needs
- housing needs for the in-care cohort, and the cohort transitioning to independence
- education needs for the in-care cohort.

We will also progress the next tranche of in-depth assessments of need and provide cross-agency responses to the in-depth assessments that were completed earlier in 2023.

We will continue our evidence work over the next six to 18 months as set out above, including improving existing disability data prevalence measurement using CYRAS data for monitoring and research to inform an improved disability 'data model' for data collection and use.

Work will commence that examines tamariki and rangatahi in the care of Oranga Tamariki who receive Disability Support Services to help Oranga Tamariki better understand their experiences and the care they receive.

6. Inconsistent government policies and practice was identified as a barrier to a successful return home. We heard about uncoordinated policy and practice between Oranga Tamariki and Kāinga Ora in particular, which lead to delays in parents receiving the right support or in accessing a suitable, stable home so their children can return.

Progress

It is vital that the material needs of whānau (such as housing) are prioritised when it is planned that they will continue to care for their tamariki or resume caring for them.

As part of the Action Plan outlined in section five, we have developed cross-agency housing related actions with the Ministry for Social Development (MSD), Ministry for Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Kāinga Ora (with other agencies). These cross agencies responses have been made publicly available and will be regularly reported on. This will support the development of co-ordinated policy and practice to support parents and families for a successful return home.

The Public Housing Fast Track (Fast Track) is a process between Oranga Tamariki, the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) and Housing and Urban Development (HUD). It aims to prioritise public housing for families who are caring for tamariki who are currently, or have previously been in the custody of Oranga Tamariki or of an iwi social service, a cultural social service. Families who are currently eligible¹ for public housing and who meet the criteria with regard to a child in the care of Oranga Tamariki, will be fast tracked and placed at the highest priority rating for public housing.

¹ Eligibility is:

4.2.1 currently includes a child or young person who is in the custody (including sole guardianship) of the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children, or of an iwi social service, a cultural social service, or a child and family support service, under the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989; or 4.2.2 receives the Orphan's Benefit or the Unsupported Child's Benefit under the Social Security Act 1964 for a child or young person who has been in the custody (including sole guardianship) of the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children, or of an iwi social service, a cultural social service, or a child and family support service, and has moved to a permanent care arrangement;

Oranga Tamariki has updated practice guidance to ensure social workers are aware of the Fast Track process and can support eligible parents, guardians and caregivers to apply to the public housing register and be fast tracked. This was shared in our last Leaders Communications update. Improving information on the Fast Track process is one of the cross-agency housing related actions.

Work is also underway to improve the information sharing between Oranga Tamariki and MSD to ensure that our children and young people are always fast-tracked where entitled. We are looking to better understand and address privacy considerations as part of this work, improving on the status quo, as some guardians and caregivers may not be aware of, or comfortable with, their information being shared with MSD.

MSD is committed to working alongside Oranga Tamariki and the other Children's Agencies through the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan to improve the wellbeing of children and young people who have entered the Oranga Tamariki system (or who are at risk of doing so, or who have had experience in the system).

MSD have noted the concerns raised with the Monitor by Oranga Tamariki kaimahi concerning parents' access to benefit support as they seek to resume caring for their tamariki. The Action Plan provides a framework both for identifying and addressing situations where there may need to be greater alignment in policy between agencies, and for driving greater information sharing and cooperation at a local level.

MSD has also made changes to its operational guidance concerning the Fast Track system for households with a child or young person in care, including to clarify that children and young people reunifying or living with their parents are eligible to be fast-tracked where they are in the care of Oranga Tamariki..

To support tamariki and rangatahi return safely to the care of their whānau and kin networks as early as is feasible, the Oranga Tamariki Ministerial Advisory Board are reviewing the underlying systemic reasons that can lead to some tamariki remaining in the custody of the Oranga Tamariki Chief Executive for extended periods of time, despite no concerns for their safety or wellbeing being raised for at least 18 months.

What we will do

Oranga Tamariki is currently working with MSD to make operational improvements and equip frontline kaimahi with the necessary information for the Fast Track process.

The Oranga Tamariki Ministerial Advisory Board will deliver a report to the Minister by 30 November 2023, the report will:

- Obtain data and insights, through research and engagement as to what of the system works well currently and what the gaps are.
- Engagement will require that the Board identify specific questions in advance, in order to take a consistent approach across discussions.
- Examine the effectiveness of the existing legislative provisions related to tamariki returning home to whānau and kin from the custody of the Oranga Tamariki Chief Executive.
- Identify work in place to respond to the recommendations of Dame Karen Poutasi about ensuring collective accountability across the Children's System.
- Define / describe what is meant by whānau care, kin care and family care, as there are important nuances across these terms, and they may require different solutions within the responses Oranga Tamariki is committed to.