



26 October 2017

Hon Carmel Sepuloni  
Minister for Social Development  
The Beehive  
WELLINGTON

Dear Minister Sepuloni

The Families Commission ('trading' as the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit, or Superu for short) is in a rather unique position because of the intended disestablishment of the organisation set in train by Ministers in April 2017. This leaves new Ministers with the planned repeal of the Families Commission Act and, until that happens, the continuing activities of the remainder of the Families Commission as described in our Statement of Performance Expectation.

The process of disestablishing Superu was associated with a review of social sector leadership and the subsequent creation of the Social Investment Agency. Ministers may now have a different view of social sector leadership and the paths both entities take in the future. Being independent of the core public sector gave Superu an undoubted advantage in the connections it had and the insights it was able to gain about the workings of social services. It must be said, however, that as a result of the planned disestablishment, Superu has lost the majority of its staff.

The investments over recent years in improving evidence sources and analytical capability have provided valuable insights, including:

- identifying a need to remedy areas of long-standing weakness in the gathering, accumulation and use of evidence
- the unrealised potential of existing data and research resources held within government and the wider social services sector
- driving policy choices through a focus on the long-term outcomes, which recognises the interdependence between different aspects of the lives of people that can be better reflected in policy and service delivery
- recognising that the scope and quality of the scientifically-based evidence that is available enables us to know how reliably we can connect services to outcomes, thus improving the ability to direct resources to where they will have the most long-term



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benefit

- that a variety of evidence sources, both qualitative and quantitative, are essential for social policy and services delivery, but finding ways to make full use of them requires strong leadership in both information policies and quality management at government level to lift sector level capability.

These insights point to a need to widen the use of the integrated data infrastructure and strengthening the integratability of existing administrative records, continuous improvement, operations research modelling and recognised evaluation methods. A range of external reviews all point to social services evaluation being weak in even simple methods of analysis.

The need for a multiplicity of forms of evidence that can be relevant is not well recognised by departments. There is no 'silver bullet' in most areas of social services. Most particularly, there are doubts of a scientific nature about the validity of predictive modelling, especially in relation to cultural bias, that merit more consideration.

The actuarial analysis of administrative data (gathered for other purposes) has not been evaluated against the likely larger and more immediate payback from attending to the wider range of opportunities to develop an evidence base. Government agencies have in the past tended to ignore the capabilities of the community and voluntary sector for data collection, evaluation and for continuously improving the services they deliver at the 'sharp end'. Superu has found that these capabilities have been at a low level and we have engaged in a successful programme of capability building through the development of accessible tools and training. It is essential that a place be found for these activities to continue.

Superu has acted as a bridge between government and the community and voluntary sectors, and this vital bridging role needs to be continued in some form. For example, as well as setting standards and developing evaluation practice among social services departments, we have led evaluations of cross-agency work, including in youth mental health and family violence. And our evidence rating scale has been taken up by Treasury in assessing budget bids.

Superu has played a broader role in the creation, sharing and use of evidence, although with our disestablishment it is not clear how this work will now advance. A number of options are available. I believe that incorporating some of the past functions of the Families Commission and Superu into the Office of the Children's Commissioner would be an alternative means of strengthening the quality of public services in vitally important areas associated with children wherever they grow up.

Over the years, there has been a tendency for the connection between departments and citizens to be one-sided and unidirectional. Superu has played a part in highlighting the risks associated with emphasising agency performance measures and efficiency rather than the experiences and perspective of citizens. Some positive change is being seen, but there are also cases where an agency-focus has given agencies and their Ministers a false sense of confidence in the quality and relevance of the services being provided.

Connecting services has become a focus of initiatives across the public sector, reinforced by the development of the integrated data infrastructure with its potential for enriching the evidence base in the social sector. Insufficient attention has, so far, been given to the

practical limits of integration and how services can be better connected in the face of these limits. Work we have published, based on a small sample of beneficiaries, points to a lack of respect and a poor understanding by government agencies of the costs placed on them when agencies lose documents or require material from other organisations. The diversity of the population, and the great diversity of circumstances that they are in, has increased over a period when targeting has become more intensive. One serious consequence is that the means by which ordinary citizens can hold government to account have reduced, resulting in a potential loss of trust in government itself.

Neither the delivery of social services in New Zealand nor the development of policy options for an increasingly complex, diverse society can be driven by myths or untested rules of thumb or beliefs. Superu began under the mantra of evidence-based policy, and our work has extended to highlighting the huge importance of diverse forms of evidence to underpin the quality of social service delivery. I believe that we have contributed to the understanding of where, why and how a scientific approach to the development and application of evidence in various forms is vital for trustworthy social services.

Because the Board of Superu has been working to ensure that this increase in the knowledge base is not lost, I welcome the opportunity to provide a more comprehensive report on any of the issues raised in the attached Briefing to the Incoming Minister or from this covering note.

You may wish to revisit the Statement of Performance Expectations, published to reflect the significant downsizing of Superu, prior to the repeal of the Families Commission Act planned by the previous government.

I look forward to working with you, and most particularly would welcome an early opportunity to discuss your intentions in light of previous Ministers' commitments to repeal our legislation.

Yours sincerely

Len Cook  
Families Commissioner and Chair of the Superu Board