

Green Paper: For Vulnerable Children Submission

For the Sake of Our Children Trust (FSOCT) is a not-for-profit organisation led by community leaders **committed to being “a voice for the voiceless.”**

The Trust speaks out for the children in our nation who have fallen victim to and who have died from abuse and neglect, advocating support for strong families and communities to ensure the best possible environment for future generations.

The Trust believes:

Every child is precious and entitled to safety, care, and access to health and education.

Strong families* are the best environments for preventing child abuse and neglect.

Engaged communities are essential to encourage and support strong families, and the wellbeing of children.

*** Families as defined as a two parent homes consisting of a mother and a father.**

Our Submission

This submission is been prepared by For the Sake of Our Children Trust Board and Management and supported by friends of the Trust. A recent meeting was held to discuss in detail this Green Paper and provide recommendations through this submission. The Trust have also met and further discussed with various supporters of the Trust to include organisations and individuals who support our views in this submission.



If possible, For the Sake of Our Children Trust Board wishes to make an oral submission to Hon. Paula Bennett and ask for at least 30 minutes in recognition of the importance and size of the issues raised in this submission and the number of stakeholders and groups who put it together.

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Chairman's Personal Comments

The Right Principles

Much of our discussion in society today centres around "buying more ambulances for the bottom of the cliff" or how much more Government should be doing. The focus is invariably about outcomes and not causation.

We are never seriously going to address "the issue" if we do not focus on "causation".

The Form of the Family is ALL Important

There is an enormous amount of evidence available in the Western world (New Zealand included), that when children are brought up in relationships outside of marriage ugly outcomes increase over 1000% – child murder, physical abuse, sexual abuse, long-term incarceration, suicide etc.

What right do we have to "trash the lives of our precious children"?

The debate often rages around – ideology, political correctness, our rights, religious belief, and so on. The debate should simply rage around – *what really works for our children?*

In this context we then need to decide which side of the fence we really sit on;

“A child trasher” – we say to heck with the 1000% plus increase in ugly outcomes.

or

“A child grower” – that belongs, that thrives, that is well nurtured, that is healthy, that is well educated that achieves.

I am clearly aspirational – and I am unashamedly on the side of the child.

When we get the principles right, we have the prospect of getting policies right. The debate therefore must firstly centre round

correct principles

which will lead to aspirational policies

which will then lead to a significant reduction in undesirable or unintended outcomes.

Dealing with the Facts – Longitudinal Studies

For over 30 years now there has been overwhelming evidence that children born/raised out of wedlock suffer;

- A staggering increase in child murder (refer New Zealand Coroners reports).
- A monumental increase in physical and sexual abuse.
- Significant increases in suicide.
- Significant increases in psychiatric disorders.
- Relative poverty.
- Relative inequality.
- Significantly lower achievement levels etc.

Legislative Frameworks

The care of the Children Bill states that the "care of our children is paramount". How can we sanction, encourage, aid and abet, any form of relationship that we know statistically will result in staggeringly worse outcomes for our precious children?

Most of the children murdered in the last 10 years (the ultimate form of abuse) were well known to Government Departments.

It seems to be a violation of the above-mentioned principles if we as a society except, tolerate, aid and abet children to be brought up in a highly vulnerable environment. This appears to me to be a violation of rights, justice, and indeed statute as referenced above.

Revisiting Fiscal Incentives

Government policy and hence fiscal incentives can help change the landscape.

- Taxpayers should not be encouraging irresponsible behaviour. Government policy should not be encouraging irresponsible behaviour. The ultimate responsibility is about a precious, vulnerable young life we bring into this world. That life needs a mum and dad committed to each other – which we know statistically provides the safest environment in the world. We should be paying/encouraging birth in wedlock – not out of wedlock. The DPB as we know it must end – it has been a social disaster.
- We fiscally incentivise and encourage the ending of relationships – we should be considering methods of enhancing the prospect of relationships surviving.
- Sickness Policies – need to be exchanged for wellness policies – people should not be incentivised by Government/taxpayers to think sick, act sick and sometimes actually be sick – they must be incentivised into wellness.
- Unemployment Policies – need to be exchanged for employment policies. Government or the taxpayer has no right to rob our citizens of their dignity, respect, sense of self-worth, the ability to contribute to the family to the community. Employment policies are a social obligation – particularly our young, should expect to leave their education with the prospect of finding a job. It is unacceptable that as a society we can say “you have no value, we would rather see you thrown on the human resource scrapheap, the economic scrapheap – because we have no better ideas”.

Community Engagement

We must never underestimate the tremendous goodwill that exists in communities, when they are encouraged, empowered, to take ownership.

- There use to be (and I believe still exists) a vast number of people in our community that would adopt at birth hugely vulnerable children. We know the statistical outcomes for adopted children at birth, are virtually the same as those bought up by married biological parents. Perhaps we could see this as the ultimate in community goodwill. Adoptions have now been relegated to almost non-existent – yet we willingly stand aside whilst tens of thousands of kids’ lives are trashed – this to me is repugnant.
- Statistically we know that adoption works considerably better than fostering – we must remain aspirational about what is good for our children and we must behave accordingly.
- When the DPB ends – monies should be redirected to Community Trusts. Sadly, relationships even with the best education, fiscal support, and policy encouragement – will fail – but we must not incentivise them to fail. Charitable clusters should be established that receive family support, on behalf of a needy/solo parent. They will take on the responsibility to see that money is applied appropriately to good food, appropriate fiscal management, clothing, etc. But most importantly there is a prospect in such relationships to provide love, care, concern and support of the parent (generally a mother) and nurture protection and help for the children thereby improving the prospect that they will still belong, although not ideally and have the prospect of thriving and achieving.

Summary

Our children are the hope of our future. They are the “voiceless”, and we must give them our voice. We must be aspirational and dream about a better world for them. The tragic destruction of our most vulnerable must end, and we must end policies that aid their destruction.

By been aspirational on "the principles" that have the best prospect of delivery we will then truly forge a roadmap of hope – for them.

One day our children or grandchildren may well ask *"when did the dawn of new hope begin"*

John Sax

Chairman

For Sake of our Children Trust

For the Sake of Our Children Trust's vision for Vulnerable Children of NZ is to see a nation where every child:

- is safe from harm;
- has a sense of belonging, of feeling loved and valued;
- has access to the basics they need to engage fully with life and realize their own unique potential.

We aim to educate, promote and raise awareness of the wellbeing of our children in New Zealand and the need for strong families and communities to support them.

For the Sake of Our Children Trust recognises the various vast issues currently faced by the NZ Government to address issues such as child abuse and neglect and it is through this submission the Trust wishes to provide simple practical solutions to mitigating such issues.

For the Sake of Our Children Trust on the Green Paper

Summary

The Green Paper takes a child-centred and family and whanau-focussed approach yet the emphasis on family and defining parenting and families remains unrecognised in the document.

The Trust will focus its submission on the key themed areas on children who have died or suffer from child abuse and neglect and the key factors contributing to this on-going national tragedy.

Key individual factors the Trust takes its perspective from are based on factors to include but not exclusive to:

Child and Family Poverty

- A flawed Welfare environment
- Domestic Purpose Benefit
- Lack of emotional and financial responsibility

Family Breakdown

- Failed relationships between parents
- Incompetent parenting
- Financial welfare incentives encouraging family breakdown

Failed Social Policy/Legislation for Vulnerable children and families

- Adoption Policy
- Employment Policy
- Relationships Act
- Property Act

The Green Paper highlights “certain things that protect children and allow them to be healthy, feel loved and resilient in the face of adversity” created by positive early childhood experiences.

The Green Paper fails to make mention as to what exactly these ‘things’ are. From a child’s optic view one would include: committed parents who are committed/married to each other delivering a loving positive parenting environment where the child does feel loved, is protected, well nurtured, and educated.

In this, the Trust agrees the Government has a key role to play – demonstrating leadership and making sound effective policy decisions.

Such leadership by the Government needs to be a reflection of strong courageous leadership, within a family setting where raising and protecting a child is paramount. The Government must do away with being ‘politically correct’ to protect adult society particularly if principles and values do not align with certain pockets or ideologies of people.

New Zealand with its Pacific location needs to also consider children do not come on their own, they come with their families. The Green Paper fails to put strong emphasis on the importance of the ‘family surrounding’ and ‘family structure’. It also fails to represent the need for strong positive parenting for the child. A vulnerable child is usually the result of vulnerable parents and/or a vulnerable family environment i.e. family breakdown.

The Government needs to also remain steadfast in principles and values that provide the foundation to building strong families, strong communities and a strong nation with strong vibrant children who as expected will thrive, belong and achieve in the long-term.

Key Message 1 - Share Responsibility:

Parents and Caregivers

FSOCT supports the statement “responsibility FIRST lies with parents and caregivers” but further definition of what ‘parenting’ and the ‘type’ of parents’ required to raise a child needs to be provided in the Green Paper and Policy Development.

The Trust would like to address this question to Government

“What is the Government’s clear definition of good parents and good parenting?”

Is this definition aligned with New Zealand society in general? “

As Government has made it clear it alone cannot improve the outcomes for vulnerable children and identifies the parents as one of the most crucial, as are the family/whanau, and communities.

The Trust believes the Government needs to recognise what is BEST for the child. There is no sighting of the word ‘marriage’ throughout the Green Paper. The Trust is a strong advocate of ‘marriage’ between parents raising children as a key success factor to how well children are in life. The Green Paper speaks of good parenting being vital but this is considered too general and that Government needs to indicate support that strong committed relationships between parents to include ‘marriage’ is ideal for mitigating children becoming vulnerable.

The Green Paper speaks of good parenting being vital, but this is considered too general and that Government needs to indicate support that strong committed relationships between parents is ‘marriage’. This is the ideal for mitigating children then becoming vulnerable.

Responsibility lies with biological parents for their biological children first and foremost.

FSOCT are not implying Marriage is the only solution, yet the Government needs to provide support for Marriage being good for our children – vulnerable or not.

The Paper implies the need for parents to be responsible but the Government needs to specifically specify the best notion of parenting: Solo parenting? Married parents? Biological parents? Extended family parenting? Separated parenting?

To respond to this part of the Green Paper the Government needs to stop being so politically correct by not including “Marriage” as a key contributor to children faring better in society.

As the focus on the Paper indicates that 15% of NZ children are at risk of not doing well, the Government needs to identify this 15% and realise if most of the children come from broken homes/family structures, this is a key contributor to “non achieving” children who should thrive, belong and achieve.

FSOCT believes that most of those who fall into this 15% category come from broken families and/or solo parent families.

FSOCT supports the statement that ‘Fathers contribute to building self-esteem and resilience in their children...’ and once again the need to ensure biological mother and father are encouraged to stay together to raise their children as best as possible through marriage/relationship support and parenting support. Recent research shows step fathers or multiple partners with a mother are frequently not a safe and healthy environment for children to be raised within.

Although the Government provides a range of parent-focussed support services, the Government needs to seriously consider the financial incentives via the welfare system that is keeping parents apart from raising their children therefore creating an underclass breeding ground for future NZ children.

FSOCT recommends:

- 1. The Government needs change the perception of marriage within the bureaucratic system and look to promote and educate ‘Marriage’ as an ideal relationship for parents to raise their children within (this would be supported by significant empirical evidence available to the Government).*
- 2. The Government must promote the Virtues/benefits of Marriage and adapting such communication campaigns to cater to age specific/ generational groups.*
- 3. The Government needs to go back to traditional principals and promote and support strong families, best parenting techniques to raising strong children in New Zealand particularly with vulnerable families.*
- 4. Individual teenage pregnancies to be monitored to ensure subsequent births by these teenagers are not encouraged.*
- 5. CYFS should be required to prove an annual report on the family background statistics of all confirmed cases of child abuse and in particular death of a child due to abuse.*
- 6. The Government could make it the responsibility of the Coroner to provide full statistics on the family background of children who have died at the hands of abuse and neglect.*

Communities:

It is very cliché to say ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ except in the case of vulnerable children the village does not seem to exist.

The truth is, it takes a “great mum and a great dad to raise a child” – assisted by the village – we can only hope the village is there – when mum and dad fail!

A village is synonymous to that of a small community – where a village is a small, distinct community where generally everybody knows everybody and what is expected of them. In New Zealand’s landscape it is these small communities in which many of our vulnerable children are coming from and yet still children are being killed.

The Government needs to be courageous in following the murder of so many of our children via child abuse and neglect and begin to redesign New Zealand’s’ social landscape.

Communities need to be educated and supported and best led by strong legislation by Government in regards to looking after its children.

Personal responsibility is that of the two parents who have brought a child into this world. It is their responsibility to raise them and keep them safe. The support of extended family/whanau is applauded but ultimately the responsibility is that of the biological parents.

It is the role of Government to set in place universal virtues and principles for communities to follow and in this case, specifically to looking after our children.

This can only be addressed through national campaigns to further educate our communities.

Media and research indicates many of our vulnerable children come from small communities and/or ethnic communities. FSOCT agree more leadership is required within such communities but this can only be fostered by Government to hold communities accountable for the children within those communities.

Recommendations –

- 1. Allow communities particularly ethnic specific communities to take responsibility and be accountable for their children who fall vulnerable to the level of extreme child abuse, neglect and death.*
- 2. Continue to support culturally appropriate initiatives that are working for our communities over a longer period of time.*
- 3. No mother should be automatically entitled to benefits for any births. Adopt a more preventative approach to reduce the increase of an underclass community and not promote a breeding ground for solo parenting communities, teenage pregnancy communities and welfare dependency communities amongst our young generation of children.*
- 4. The Government to invest in local community leadership, provide support to local governance bodies to deliver on strength-based outcomes for its communities through child-centre focussed policies.*
- 5. The Government, in partnership with local community groups and neighbourhood watch, to provide a national campaign similar to that of 'neighbourhood watch to encourage stronger community relations within the community and also to report child abuse and neglect to authorities.*
- 6. Local Government specifically develop and implement Children Action Plans within its local plans.*

Show Leadership

FSOCT supports the statement 'Leadership is crucial' to protect our vulnerable children, yet the Government needs to show bold and courageous leadership that is not politically correct and withholding at the detriment of our children.

Leadership also needs to begin in the family and a long-term commitment to making a difference is needed first by parents to care and love their children.

For Government to successfully work with other leaders, the Government must first define clear principles, values and definition concerning parenting, families and relationships (especially to include marriage).

Vulnerable Children's Action Plan

FSOCT recommends –

- 1. An Action plan would be good for all children vulnerable or not. The Government needs to take a stance and provide it's view on the best and ideal parenting environment, strong families definition and promote the BEST relationship to raise children based on empirical evidence i.e. Marriage.*
- 2. A National Framework Children Action Plan should be developed based on what already exists and delivered across all Child Family agencies to support vulnerable children within the system.*
- 3. A priority for the early years is the implementation of a life course approach for all children should commence at birth for all children to be monitored up until they reach secondary school – a 13year life course approach for all children.*
- 4. The Action plan must be culturally appropriate to include appropriate universal principles to ensure the well-being of children is paramount.*

Legislation Changes

FSOCT agree legislation changes are required to ensure the implementation and delivery of a successful Children's Action plan.

Any legislation aligned with the Action plan needs to align itself to other key legislation that is relative to children and families. Such legislation would include matters concerning the Marriage Act, welfare reform legislation (to include the domestic purposes benefit) and relative Employment legislation.

A key legislation that could make a difference to mitigating the increase in vulnerable children in New Zealand is the Government reviewing its current Adoption policy (if any in NZ), the Relationship Act, Privacy Act – the mentioned legislation (and possibly more) need to also align itself to a Children's Act within New Zealand.

FSOCT recommends:

- 1. Remove all financial incentive to having children within a single parent environment and more children within this environment.*
- 2. The Government to review its current legislation that directly impact the stability of positive parenting relationships and marriage to include: The Property's Act, The Relationships Act. This should also include welfare policies like the Domestic Purposes Benefit and Employment Policies.*
- 3. Abolishing the DPB would also decrease the likelihood for fathers not to be involved with their children or committed to the mother of their child which is a key factor in the prevalence of child abuse.*
- 4. The Government to review its current legislation that directly impacts the stability of positive parenting relationships and marriage to include: The Property's Act and The Relationship Act. This should also include welfare policies like the Domestic Purposes Benefit and Employment Policies.*
- 5. The role of the Children's Commissioner should be to exhibit the best interests of the child and not the parent or society at large. It is not the Children's commissioner's role to be politically correct for the sake of pleasing politicians and parents but to have a child-like optic view towards the wellbeing of children of New Zealand.*
- 6. The value of using legislation to underpin a Children's Action plan is to use courageous terminology and include words that affirm strong families, strong relationships to include marriage, best parenting models ideally suited for our children. Such values will set precedent to what is BEST for all children including vulnerable children and would mitigate an on-going breeding underclass of children for future generations.*

Working with Whanau, hapu, iwi and Maori Leaders

FSOCT endorses the view of strengthening further collaboration between the Government and Maori community. Yet, this collaboration needs to be seen across all ethnic communities to include Pacific and Asia communities.

Unfortunately the statistics of vulnerable children – including many who have died as a result of child abuse and neglect – have come from the Maori Community.

The Government have continued to provide avenues to strengthen identity, language and culture for Maori and yet the alarming child death results continue to rise.

FSOCT has discussed this matter in detail and believe Maori leadership concerning its children/tamariki needs to be more vocal and constructive and deal specifically with the key issues/factors that are stopping Maori communities from achieving, stopping Maori children from being killed due to abuse and neglect.

Maori leaders need to adopt a national campaign further promoting the importance of iwi, hapu and whanau within the world of its vulnerable children.

The statement “it takes a village to raise a child’ can be seen within a Maori context from an iwi/hapu/whanau point of view yet still children are falling through the gaps and dying. The Maori community needs to be accountable for the death of Maori children therefore Maori leaders need to strive harder to find solutions.

FSOCT recommends

- 1. The Government must include a specific element in the Vulnerable Children’s Action Plan to address the problems within the Maori Community concerning tamariki.*
- 2. The Government needs to better understand WHY and figure out HOW it can best address Maori’s over representation in social adverse areas concerning children, families and parenting engaging with Maori leaders.*
- 3. The Government in partnership with Maori Leaders within the small group of people who are causing serious issues/crimes concerning children and families take a preventative approach and look to minimise future generations being birthed into the same socially adverse environments.*
- 4. The Government must openly examine and discuss the impact of welfare dependency has had on Maori communities and look to address how better it can take a strength-based approach to building stronger relationships/marriages, whanau and children for the future of New Zealand.*

Make Child –Centred Policy Changes

FSOCT supports the need for Government to more effectively target money to best address the needs of vulnerable children.

The Government should already know what programmes are successfully working for our children and families and continue to support and grow these programmes on a regional/national level.

FSOCT believes children should be viewed within its family context and look at how the parents/caregivers are spending its money that is supposed to be for the children. In particular, vulnerable children within the welfare system who are entirely reliant on benefit funds tend to experience basic deficits in necessities such as nourishment and health checks.

FSOCT does not support the idea of a child-first allocation policy where agencies would give priority to families with vulnerable children as this setting would only provide further incentive for families to become dependent on government over a long period of time. If this is the case, a timeframe needs to be put in place and subsequent children should not be birthed into the current situation in order for such families to become trapped forever.

FSOCT is an organisation that supports the sharing of information amongst key social service agencies such as CYFs, the police, hospitals/DHBs. Particularly in the case of abuse and neglect all matters regarding privacy law should be waived in such cases.

FSOCT recommends

- 1. The Government welfare spending which is directed to parents to care for children should be kept with government/responsible community agencies to allocate directly and monitored appropriately towards achieving the necessities for children through education, health and general wellbeing of the child(ren)*
- 2. The Government must continue to work with community organisations which are providing clear positive results within families and children. Government needs to invest and grow these organisations to stretch its services.*
- 3. More support for the likes of Plunket to assist parents to parent babies appropriately.*
- 4. Transfer funding from welfare benefit activity in order to spend more on children and their specific needs.*

5. *The Government through its contractual obligations with organisations would have the basis to identifying what works and what isn't working due to its quantitative data collected.*
6. *Funding could be allocated to an independent government body to oversee all matters concerning children of abuse and neglect incidents, and especially death incidents.*

Make Child –Centred Policy Changes

FSOCT generally agrees with the key message of improving NZ services for children and families.

This needs to work in parallel with implementing preventative strategies of children being born into vulnerable environments. If this is not the case, child services in NZ will be further stretched to accommodate future generations.

As stated above FSOCT would like to see an independent Government body act as a 'watchdog' and hold government agencies accountable for its practice of delivering on its services to vulnerable children and their families.

FSOCT recommends:

1. *The Government should work in smaller regional communities to retrieve faster results regarding vulnerable children and their families.*
2. *All necessary compulsory health and social checks for children should be monitored as part of a child's life-cycle programme up to a certain. As a requirement, the issue should not be whether this upsets parents but that the wellbeing of a child is paramount.*
3. *Funding should be allocated to national campaigns to promote a child-friendly nation, strong family friendly nation and the promotion of healthy relationships to raise children to particularly include 'marriage'.*
4. *A review of New Zealand's adoption policy needs to take into considering the child first and foremost and the role of (unfit) biological parents becomes secondary to the potential adoptee for the baby.*

Ideas for projects that would support Vulnerable Children in New Zealand

Initiative 1 – Growing Strong Families and Healthy Parenting Relationships in New Zealand.

Concept: Promoting healthy positive relationships to include Marriage and the best environment to birth and raise children in.

Execution: The Government in partnership with community groups/organisations to deliver a national communication campaign promoting Marriage and healthy parenting relationships as the best ideal environment. This is to be rolled out in secondary schools, all Plunket locations and through the social services organisations. This endorsement by government and community would provide the platform for changing the paradigm thinking and social conscience of society to support and encourage positive relationships to include Marriage to work towards building great families in NZ.

Initiative 2 –Culturally Empower Communities and Leaders

Concept: Educate and support our future Maori and Pacific leaders about the need speak out and build strong families and communities particularly for vulnerable children.

Execution: Identified leaders to be spokespeople for promoting what is best for our children and having each involved in a National Road show campaign to speak in small communities, iwi communities and in particular churches. This would empower our young leaders to embrace any challenges from the community and government but allow for them to be the ‘voice for the voiceless’ children of New Zealand.

Initiative 3 – A full public inquiry into the death of any child from child abuse and neglect

Concept: At least 12 children die per year of child abuse and neglect. The story of where these children come from and how best society, the government and individuals can minimise such numbers annually needs to be addressed outwardly and publicly.

Execution: An independent government body – i.e. The Children’s Commissioner’s Office in collaboration with the Coroner and CYFS – to provide the public with an full annual review

on the family background of where all the children who have died to date of child abuse and neglect come from and specifically look at common factors that should be addresses through strategic initiatives implemented by Government and communities. This review should be conducted annually (based on the estimate of 10-12 children dying every year). The Office of the Children’s Commissioner needs to take leadership and hold all systemic key stakeholders involved accountable for the subsequent death of each child and set a specified timeframe to close each inquiry with the assistance of coroner reports and detailed research within New Zealand.

FORM OF THE FAMILY PAPER

Civil Union Paper

SUBMITTED TO ALL POLITICIANS 2004