



Te Hiku Iwi Development Trust

Strengthening Child Protection and Government Submission of Te Hiku Iwi Development Trust



*Te Hiku o Te Ika Iwi – Crown Social Development and Wellbeing Accord Outcomes:
Whānau Ora, Whai Rawa, Mātauranga, Mana Māori, Tū Rangatira, Hauora, Whare Āhuru*

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He kūaka mārangaranga kōtahi te manu i tau, tau atu ki te tāhuna tau atu, tau atu e.
The godwit flock has arisen, one bird has come to rest on the beach, others will follow.

Strengthening Child Protection and Government
Submission of Te Hiku Iwi Development Trust

To: Ministry of Social Development – Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group

Date: 24 June 2026

Executive Summary

Te Hiku Iwi Development Trust supports the Government’s commitment to strengthening protections for tamariki following the Dame Karen Poutasi Review.

The circumstances that gave rise to the review exposed significant failures across multiple government systems and demonstrated the devastating consequences when those systems fail to respond effectively to vulnerable children and whānau.

However, Te Hiku considers that the Government’s early response in implementing solutions is reactive, instead of pro-active. It is based on a solution that creates additional layers of complexity in a sector that is already struggling to perform under the weight of demand, without adequate resource to meet the current need of their core customers.

As a result, the Government’s current implementation programme risks investing heavily in mechanisms designed to identify harm after it has emerged while under-investing in the interventions most likely to prevent harm from occurring in the first place.

The creation of a Multi-Agency Hub, expansion of reporting mechanisms, and development of mandatory reporting obligations may improve system visibility, but visibility alone does not keep children safe. On the face of it, creation of additional reporting requirements in system allows for more information to be shared for the purpose of preventing harm to children. But collectively, agencies already have access to the best information possible in order to identify whānau at potential risk and the ability to influence decisions that prevent harm from occurring in the first instance.

Te Hiku believes the opportunity presented by the Poutasi Review is much larger than the proposals currently under consideration. It is an opportunity to fundamentally strengthen the way government, Iwi Māori, communities, and service providers work together to identify vulnerability early, support whānau before crisis emerges, and prevent avoidable harm.

This submission therefore calls for a recalibration of the Government’s implementation approach that is under-pinned by prevention, whānau wellbeing outcomes, and Iwi-crown partnership models.

1. The Government has taken a narrow and short-sighted view in its immediate response to the recommendations

Te Hiku acknowledges the urgency that has driven the Government's response to the Poutasi Review. However, urgency should not prevent careful consideration of key drivers for change and an integrated approach to designing and delivering high value solutions.

Ensuring that information is available to identify risk of children who have a sole caregiver in prison is important in the current system context. However, the bigger opportunity for lasting change is that information we already have on hand can be converted into coordinated action capable of protecting the child and supporting the whānau before they land in high risk scenarios.

Te Hiku considers that under-pinning logic for levers of change should be re-framed from:

How do we generate additional layers of compliance and reporting in our current system to reduce risk and harm to children?

to:

How do we ensure that information and resources already available to government agencies results in timely, coordinated, and effective support for children and whānau?

2. The current response prioritises detection over prevention

A consistent theme throughout the Government's response is investment in mechanisms designed to identify children once risk or harm has occurred. Mandatory reporting, mandatory training, information sharing arrangements, and the proposed Hub are all primarily detection and response mechanisms. While these mechanisms may have value, they are not interventions in themselves.

- Mandatory reporting does not prevent abuse.
- Information sharing does not prevent abuse.
- Reporting systems do not prevent abuse.

They are mechanisms that activate protective measures once harm, risk, or vulnerability has already occurred. Te Hiku is concerned that significant public investment is being directed toward strengthening downstream responses while comparatively little attention is being given to upstream prevention. The greatest opportunity for long-term improvement in child wellbeing lies in reducing the conditions that create harm in the first place.

A prevention-focused response would place greater emphasis on:

- De-centralised approach to delivery, a custom fit to locality and demography of whānau in need;
- Working with trusted partners to provide community-based intervention; and
- Investment in delivery settings that focus on strengthening whānau capability before crisis occurs.

- Agency commitment to pro-active and collaborative ways of working - information sharing, identifying and implementing integrated system solutions
- Accountability and reporting tools that incorporate whānau wellbeing measures to measure collective impact, as well as evaluate overall effectiveness + efficiency of response

3. The missing conversation: The role of the justice system

One of the most significant issues arising from the circumstances considered through the Poutasi Review is the relationship between justice system decisions and child wellbeing outcomes.

The Government's implementation programme focuses heavily on what should happen once a sole parent has entered the justice system and been remanded into custody or sentenced to imprisonment. This is an important consideration. However, Te Hiku believes a more fundamental question remains largely unexplored.

What consideration is given to the wellbeing of children when decisions are being made that may result in the incarceration of a sole parent or primary caregiver?

The proposed Multi-Agency Hub is intended to respond to vulnerability created by imprisonment. Much less attention appears to have been given to whether elements of that vulnerability could be prevented through stronger consideration of child wellbeing within justice system decision-making processes.

The circumstances examined by the review demonstrate that decisions made within one part of government can have profound consequences for children elsewhere in the system. A genuinely integrated government response must therefore extend beyond post-event co-ordination and include examination of how policy, operational, and judicial decisions across the wider system contribute to vulnerability. Without this broader analysis, there is a risk that government will continue responding to problems that its own systems are helping to create.

4. Government is under-utilising existing Iwi partnerships and community capability

A further concern is the limited evidence that existing Iwi capability has informed either the design or implementation of the current response. The Government's proposals largely focus on the creation of new structures, new obligations, and new processes.

At the same time, proven Iwi-led models already exist that demonstrate effective approaches to reducing harm, coordinating services, and supporting whānau.

Te Hiku Iwi Development Trust partnership with NZ Police "*Whiria Te Muka*" provides a clear example of how we can strengthen Crown approach to delivery and improve outcomes for the community they serve. Established as a partnership between Te Hiku Iwi and New Zealand Police, Whiria Te Muka was developed to address whānau harm through coordinated, strengths-based, and locally responsive intervention.

The model supports agencies and providers to:

- Identify and remove system barriers;
- Co-ordinate responses around whānau;
- Strengthen service integration;
- Improve information flow;
- Address root causes of harm; and
- Build long-term community capability.

The significance of Whiria Te Muka is not that it represents an alternative programme. It's significance is that it demonstrates the capability Government is seeking already exists.

The challenge is not the absence of effective models. The challenge is the willingness of government systems to invest in, partner with, and scale approaches that are already delivering value.

Te Hiku considers that future investment should build on proven Iwi-led approaches before establishing additional layers of centralised infrastructure.

5. The current approach risks embedding existing system failures

Te Hiku supports decisive action to strengthen child safety. However, we are concerned that aspects of the current implementation programme have progressed ahead of meaningful engagement with Iwi Māori, providers, and communities. As a result, there is a risk that weaknesses currently present within the system become embedded within future system design.

Design decisions made now will shape investment, legislation, operating models, and workforce expectations for many years to come. Where underlying assumptions are flawed, those flaws can become institutionalised.

For this reason, Te Hiku believes implementation should be re-calibrated before significant legislative expansion occurs. The objective should not be rapid implementation for its own sake. The objective should be durable improvement in outcomes for tamariki.

Achieving that outcome requires careful design, meaningful partnership, and a willingness to challenge assumptions about:

1. what is driving system failure
2. what interventions will best address system failure.

6. Te Hiku response to specific proposals

Mandatory training

Te Hiku supports mandatory training where it is co-designed with Iwi Māori, Māori providers and includes:

- Te Tiriti o Waitangi;
- Tikanga Māori;
- Cultural safety;

- Anti-racism practice;
- Family violence;
- Intergenerational trauma; and
- Whānau-centred engagement approaches.

Training must strengthen capability while reducing bias and improving decision-making.

Mandatory reporting

Te Hiku does not support mandatory reporting as a standalone solution. If introduced, it must be accompanied by:

- Significant investment in response capability;
- Safeguards against racial bias;
- Independent Iwi Māori oversight;
- Māori data sovereignty protections; and
- Transparent monitoring of impacts on tamariki Māori and whānau.

Multi-agency hub

The Hub should be implemented using a de-centralised approach, through partnership Iwi Māori. It should focus on identifying whānau most at risk and providing practical and pro-active support to families rather than automatic statutory intervention.

Children's worker safety checking

Te Hiku supports strengthening safety checking requirements provided they include cultural capability and avoid creating unnecessary barriers for Māori workforce participation.

Final Recommendations

Te Hiku recommends that Government:

Shift investment toward prevention and early intervention –

1. Examine the role of justice system decisions in creating vulnerability for children.
2. Establish genuine Crown–Iwi partnership arrangements for implementation and oversight.
3. Invest in proven Iwi partnerships (such as the Te Hiku Iwi – Crown Social Accord and Joint Work Programme) and Iwi-led operating models (such as Whiria Te Muka).
4. Strengthen collective accountability across all Crown agencies for child wellbeing outcomes.
5. Ensure independent monitoring and evaluation of impacts on tamariki and their whānau.