

Oranga Tamariki Response to *Experiences of Care in Aotearoa*

Response from Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children to the
Aroturuki Tamariki – Independent Children’s Monitor *Experiences
of Care in Aotearoa* report for 1 July 2023 – 30 June 2024

20 February 2025

Response to the fourth full report from Aroturuki Tamariki

Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children (Oranga Tamariki) acknowledges the Aroturuki Tamariki | Independent Children’s Monitor (the Monitor) report on agency compliance with the Oranga Tamariki (National Care Standards and Related Matters) Regulations 2018. We value the Monitor’s independence and the report’s insights into the lives and experiences of tamariki, whānau, communities, caregivers and kaimahi involved with the Children’s System.

This is the fourth report that shows insufficient progress by Oranga Tamariki. We are very concerned that serious issues continue to be raised and we are still not meeting the National Care Standards. We acknowledge the Monitor’s key findings that:

1. Tamariki and rangatahi are still not receiving the minimum standard of care required by the National Care Standards.
2. This is because social workers are not always able to work effectively.
3. Some of things getting in the way of social workers doing social work.
4. Tamariki and rangatahi in care are not prioritised for government services and funding does not follow the child.
5. More tamariki and rangatahi are being abused in care.

Last year Oranga Tamariki developed an Implementation Plan to focus our organisation on three areas: delivering our core purpose, changing our culture and getting the basics right. The Implementation Plan includes 21 deliverables to help us re-prioritise and focus on what is most important: caring and protecting the most vulnerable children and young people.

Some key deliverables in our Plan will directly address findings from the Monitor’s report and help improve compliance with the National Care Standards. This includes actions regarding social work practice, safety in residences, support for caregivers and responding to complaints.

Other key deliverables in our Plan will help create the right organisational settings to ensure National Office roles better support frontline delivery and Oranga Tamariki is a high-performing and efficient Ministry. This includes actions regarding financial management, commissioning and investment, meeting legislative requirements, organisational culture and supporting kaimahi ora. In addition, as a result of this report we will develop a National Care Standard Action Plan that will focus on those 21 lead indicators to improve the care of children.

Oranga Tamariki is committed to its vision, that all tamariki are safe, loved and nurtured by whānau, hapū, and iwi and supported by thriving communities. While there is still a significant amount of work to be done, we are confident that our Plan is focused on the right things and relentlessly applying our Plan will improve the way we work with tamariki. The Monitor’s findings will inform the ongoing development and delivery of this work, and we expect to see progress reflected in our National Care Standards self-compliance monitoring and in future findings from the Monitor.



1. Tamariki and rangatahi are still not receiving the minimum standard of care required by the National Care Standards

We acknowledge that more needs to be done to deliver against the basics of the National Care Standards. We acknowledge that some areas of the National Care Standards need more traction, including full information in needs assessments and timely completion of All About Me Plans. When we do focus, we can make a measurable difference.

What we are doing

Our Implementation Plan specifically focuses on

- Social worker visits to tamariki
- Reducing placements with unapproved caregivers
- Allocating cases on time
- Finding and returning missing tamariki to care
- Completing safety assessments for critical and very urgent Reports of Concern on time
- Improving complaint management
- Improving support for caregivers

This prioritisation has already resulted in significant shifts in some areas. Operational data (as at 12 February) shows there are no tamariki living with a caregiver whose assessment has been declined¹ and a material reduction in tamariki not visited by a social worker in the past eight weeks, since October 2024. We will continue this momentum and expect to see improved results for the 2024/25 financial year.

2. social workers are not always able to work effectively; and 3. things getting in the way of social workers doing social work

Our social workers are critical to the work that we do, and we were pleased to see the Monitor acknowledge their commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of tamariki. Oranga Tamariki must ensure social workers have the tools, training and most importantly, the time to focus on supporting the tamariki and whānau we serve.

What we are doing

We are actively working to free up social workers so they can focus on delivering high-quality social work practice.

Our Frontline Technology Systems Upgrade (FTSU) will replace old technology that is no longer fit for purpose, including CYRAS, the 22-year-old case management system that social workers use day-to-day. FTSU will make a positive difference for social workers by simplifying information recording so they don't need to spend time duplicating information across systems, and can instead focus on engaging with tamariki, rangatahi, whānau, victims, caregivers and partners.

¹ This can happen when older rangatahi move themselves to an unapproved placement with a caregiver who is then assessed and declined, or when a significant change in a caregiver's circumstances mean they must be reassessed and are declined.

We are continuing to implement and embed our Practice Approach, which enables social workers to better understand and meet the needs of tamariki and whānau and work in new ways with iwi, Māori and community-led approaches. We have received positive feedback from kaimahi and community partners about new tools we implemented during 2024 and heard positive stories from tamariki and whānau of their experience with the tools. Throughout the second half of 2025 we will see even more focus on new tools that can support the practice approach.

During 2024, we trialled Allied Support Workers roles to help free up social workers to focus on delivering high-quality social work practice by taking on tasks that don't require a social work qualification. Following a positive evaluation, the position has been integrated permanently with 33 Allied Support Workers employed nationwide.

4. Tamariki and rangatahi in care are not prioritised for government services and funding does not follow the child

We agree with the Monitor's findings the Children's System is letting tamariki down. As the report identifies, health and education needs are still not being met consistently for all tamariki in care. Children's agencies must better prioritise meeting the needs of tamariki in care, and issues regarding which agency is responsible for funding a service should not prevent or delay that service from being accessed.

Oranga Tamariki acknowledges that improving cross-agency collaboration needs to continue to be a priority for the Children's System. Chief Executives from Oranga Tamariki, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education are already prioritising work to understand the barriers to tamariki and rangatahi in care accessing services and developing options on how funding may follow children.

During its monitoring, the Monitor saw examples of individual kaimahi from agencies working together to better meet the needs of tamariki and rangatahi in care and the positive impact of specific roles dedicated to enabling better cross-agency collaboration such as Senior Health and Education Advisors within Oranga Tamariki. We are pleased to see the Monitor highlight examples of success but it's clear that overall, the Children's System is still falling short. Children's agencies must better prioritise work to improve the system so that these positive examples become business as usual.

What we are doing

In March 2024, the Minister for Children approved a small number of focus areas for the Oranga Tamariki Action Plan to be delivered over the next six to 18 months. These focus areas supersede the cross-agency plans that were approved by the Social Well-Being Board in 2023. Under the Health focus areas, agencies will be progressing a redesign of the Gateway service and enhancing visibility of children in care in the health system. Oranga Tamariki will be working alongside Health agencies to develop and implement a cross-government mental health work programme which sits outside the focus areas for the Action Plan.

Chief Executives from Oranga Tamariki, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education recently met and agreed to prioritise work to understand the barriers to tamariki and rangatahi in care accessing services.

5. More tamariki and rangatahi are being abused in care

We want to be clear that any harm to a child or young person in care is unacceptable.

From 2022-2023, there was a concerning increase in both the number of tamariki with a finding of harm and the number of findings of harm². Our analysis suggests the increase reflects our focus on improving reporting of harm and the changing demographic of tamariki in care, with a larger proportion of older tamariki with higher and more complex needs.

What we are doing

Over the past few years, we have taken steps to address this including improving tamariki awareness of how to make a complaint, strengthening recording and responding to allegations of harm and improving awareness of the need for a formal Report of Concern to be entered and assessed in all situations of harm to tamariki.

This year our data on harm findings remained relatively unchanged. There was a small increase (2%) in the number of tamariki with a finding of harm and a small decrease (1.4%) in the number of findings of harm. However, we are concerned about any harm occurring and our Implementation Plan aims to address this by prioritising actions which help protect children and young people from harm. This includes:

- Improving the ease of making complaints and/or allegations of harm.
- Focusing on quality practice by rolling out a new Practice Framework to support our staff with improved practice with a clear focus on the child.
- Setting three focus areas for the organisation with 21 actions to lift performance, these actions will bring a focus on safety and a reduction in harm.
- Continuing to implement the practice approach and supporting kaimahi to deliver quality practice.
- Lifting the leadership capability and culture.
- Working with the Crown Response Office to address the findings and recommendations (if accepted) following the Royal Commission into Abuse in State Care report.

Making residences safer by:

- Individualised and targeted action plans for each facility with a focus on reducing harm and improving the environments.
- Focusing on improving our practice for our frontline kaimahi through skills training and professional development.
- Enhancing our legislation as part of the Reducing Youth Offending Programme of work.
- Completing the roster pilot at Te Puna Wai which is piloting a new, fit for purpose roster.
- Lifting capability through targeted recruitment of our frontline staff.
- Enhancing our leadership and culture in our residences with a focus on personal accountability
- Developing quality assurance of improvement safety and practice at residence.

² The number of findings of harm is different to the number of tamariki with a finding of harm. A tamaiti may have been harmed more than once in the reporting period and/or a single instance of harm may have included more than one harm finding (e.g. physical abuse and emotional abuse).

The majority of harm findings reported are alleged to have been caused by other tamariki and rangatahi with the highest occurrence seen in residences and group homes where 79 percent of the harm was caused by other tamariki in the placement. Our focus on safely operating residences includes training for residence kaimahi so they can identify and de-escalate situations that might result in harm.

Harm to tamariki across all age groups, either declined or remained broadly stable, except for harm to other rangatahi aged over 14 years of age. Findings of harm for very young children have remained consistently low.

Other work underway that will help improve the safety and wellbeing of tamariki in care includes the recently announced Child Protection Investigation Unit (CPIU) that will operate independently and conduct rigorous and transparent investigations into cases of harm to tamariki in state care; and the cross-agency plan to address the findings in the final report from the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care.

Conclusion

We acknowledge that there needs to be an urgent fundamental shift in the focus and effort that the organisation places on meeting the National Care Standards and the support we provide our kaimahi, to enable them to achieve this.

We value the reflections made by the Monitor and appreciate the role the Monitor plays in helping the children's system continually improve and make Aotearoa a safer place for tamariki to grow up.

The actions included in this response will be part of a more comprehensive work programme to address the issues raised in this report. When the plan is completed, we will discuss it with you to ensure it addresses your concerns and meet with you regularly to enable you to monitor progress.