Social Services

Focus Group Evaluation

Prepared for the Productivity Commission by
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Context

After submitting its final report on its Inquiry into *More Effective Social Services* in August 2015, the Productivity Commission is now conducting an evaluation of its performance. The evaluation includes: focus groups of inquiry participants; a survey of inquiry participants; an independent expert evaluation; and administrative data. Additionally, the Board will make an overall assessment of inquiry performance having regard to all elements.

This report presents the results of two focus groups held in Wellington on 30 November and 3 December 2015, with the following participants:

Trevor McGlinchey	New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services
Hilary Stace	Victoria University of Wellington
Julie Haggie	Home & Community Health Association
Marilyn Head	New Zealand Nurses Organisation
Ian Binnie	Superu
John Wilkinson	Ministry of Health
Al Morrison	State Services Commission

Input was also gathered through separate phone interviews with the following people from outside Wellington who had not been able to attend the focus group sessions in person:

Carolyn Gullery	Canterbury & West Coast DHBs
Rachel Enosa	Alliance Health Plus Trust
Donna Matahaeri-Atariki	Te Runaka o Otakou

The objective of the focus groups and phone interviews was to provide a range of views on the overall performance of the inquiry. It is important to note that no attempt was made to reach a consensus among the participants and, as a result, some pieces of feedback may appear to contradict others. For example, criticisms of the length of the Commission's report sit alongside criticisms that certain material was left out. Also, sometimes participants' perceptions of what was recommended or assumed by the Commission were at odds with what the Commission intended or explicitly stated. In a few such instances, footnotes have been included to clarify these differences.

The focus groups and phone interviews were conducted with reference to the Commission's performance measures which are listed below and considered in turn in the body of the report.

1. The *focus* of the inquiry report, including:
   - the significance of the issues covered
   - whether they were covered in sufficient depth
   - the relevance of information sourced and people engaged with
2. Satisfaction with the *process management* for the inquiry
3. The *quality* of analysis of information and the quality of the findings and recommendations
4. The quality and *effectiveness* of the Commission's *engagement* in completing the inquiry
5. The effectiveness of *delivery of message*, as evidenced in the inquiry reports and supporting material (summary reports and supplementary papers).

The Focus of the Inquiry

Significance of the issues

There was agreement among participants that the issues covered by the inquiry were significant:

This is an extraordinarily important issue and the Commission has made a significant contribution to policy thinking

I thought it was such an important piece of work

It's been a long time coming. NGOs have done many reports and surveys saying similar things but it doesn't seem to be valued unless the government does it

The Commission's approach was consistent with work we have been doing for several years now that has a really positive impact on people's lives

There was definitely a need for a report on social services. The Commission's inquiry provided a useful challenge to how well the current system is working.

Another comment was that the report was "*incredibly significant"* because of who had commissioned it and why. The Ministers who had commissioned the inquiry were looking for solutions that had not been delivered by other government agencies. The key issue was therefore how to get the public service working more effectively.

Some felt that the inquiry initially appeared to be quite narrow, possibly based on the inquiry title. However it turned out to be a lot more significant:

The Commission took a much wider brief than it began with

They developed the context as they went.

Because the inquiry was being done by the Productivity Commission, many people thought it was all about doing more for less:

A lot of participants in the inquiry didn't understand the profound nature of the potential impact

The inquiry was far more aspirational than simply doing more for less, it was about doing the right things to get the best outcomes and created an opportunity to empower clients and providers.

Problem identification

Some group members felt that the Commission had done a good job of identifying problems with the current system:

The problems were well-defined in the draft report.

However others felt it was not clear what problems the inquiry was aiming to solve:

Why is this being done?

The context isn't clear

The problem definition needed to be clearer

The system is broken, however the problems needed to be spelled-out and carefully examined, possibly using specific examples. Without that understanding, the responses may not address the problems

The terms of reference weren't clear what the problem was.

There was a view among a number of participants that the Commission had concluded that the current system is broken, without adequately challenging that proposition. The Commission's report seemed to be proposing significant change, however some participants weren't convinced that was needed. Some group members thought that the report should have given more recognition to the positive aspects of the current system and recommended modifications rather than significant reform.

Another criticism was that the report was lacking a statement about the broader aims of the social services system and the values that underpin it:

It doesn't set out what we want from the system

The first principles are missing.

Assumptions

Some participants thought that the inquiry was geared towards the privatisation of social services and that the Commission's recommendations had been strongly influenced by a number of implicit assumptions, including:

- that social services, as provided in the current system, are unaffordable

- that private provision improves efficiency and productivity

- that, because there is no financial transaction involved, there is no value or productivity attributed to the work of volunteers[1]

- that contestability always leads to accountability

- that the market knows best.

These people queried the Commission's faith in market mechanisms to help solve problems in delivering social services, with one person commenting that the market-driven approach had created social problems in the first place.

A wider context for the inquiry

There was quite a strong theme in one discussion that the inquiry needed a wider context. While one person commented that the terms of reference for the inquiry precluded the Commission from taking a wider view, others disagreed on that point. Issues that some participants felt should have been considered by the Commission included:

- the social determinants of health

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[1] The Commission made one recommendation explicitly referencing volunteers:
"R5.2: The Government should take account of the role and value of volunteers as an important part of social services when drafting new legislation. It should seek to understand the consequences for volunteering of new legislation, and ensure that intended benefits are not outweighed by unintended costs."

- poverty, low incomes, the minimum wage, options like reintroducing the Family Benefit

- immigration and employment policies

- the social services workforces

- contracting forms and hours of work

- structural discrimination

- the different levels of service provided to people in similar circumstances by the ACC and Health systems – the report could have usefully discussed this and gone back to the Woodhouse Report

- the role of international conventions and whether New Zealand was meeting its commitments under these.

The people engaged with and information sourced

A couple of group members noted that it was probably difficult for Commission staff to understand what it is like to "*live precariously day to day".* The feeling was that, while the Commission had engaged with provider groups, there had not been engagement with the people actually using the services:

The (Commission's) process doesn't get to the people who are most marginalised

They should have gone to actual clients.

Another participant agreed that the client voice was missing:

It's hard to find the clients in the centre.

The voice of people who volunteer in the social services system also seemed to be largely missing.

There were several comments from one group member about the lack of engagement with the workforces involved in delivering social services – nurses, social workers, doctors, and unions (other than the CTU):

These workforces seemed to be ignored by the Commission even though they have a huge impact on the success of social service delivery and extensive knowledge of how systems actually work.[2]

A number of people thought the Commission had done a good job of gathering relevant information. However one suggestion was that the Commission would have benefited from a more thorough review of the history of these issues in New Zealand, especially the work done by the Royal Commission on Social Policy.

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[2] The Commission met with PSA staff and a group of caregivers in Wellington. It spoke with a range of social workers, caregivers and doctors as part of its attendance at various workshops and conferences. The Commission also met with unions other than the CTU, for example the PSA.

Process Management

Many participants were very complimentary about the way the Commission had managed its process, using expressions like:

Exemplary

Brilliant

Pretty slick

Can't fault them

I was very satisfied.

People had generally found the Commission to be very open. Some people commented that the Commission was working with a very entrenched culture in the public sector and had done an excellent job of navigating both this and the political environment.

Other comments on the Commission's process management for this inquiry included that:

- the Commission's timeframes were excellent, allowing a decent amount of time to consider report and make submissions

- there had been a really good process to look at the draft report

- the role envisaged for one agency by the Commission changed quite significantly between the draft and the final reports, which caught the agency a bit off-guard

- while there was less opportunity to consult on the final report, this had been signalled

- the hard copies of the Commission's reports had been appreciated

- participants were satisfied with how the case studies they had provided to the Commission had been presented in the inquiry reports

- the next steps were made clear.

Promoting debate

One person talked about how the Commission's draft report had prompted some groups to get together (without the Commission) to share ideas on the report and its recommendations. This was seen as very useful in that it got people talking about the deeper issues and challenged the opinions of the groups involved. This process, prompted by the draft report, also helped the groups involved to develop a more structured and informed response for when it met the Commission:

Lots of people went through the material and held detailed discussions.

Another person who had been involved in making submissions talked about how the inquiry had provided an opportunity for provider groups to collaborate and work through complex issues they had been grappling with for some time:

We don't often get the opportunity to influence policy – the whole process was very welcome.

Quality of Analysis, Findings and Recommendations

Quality of analysis

A participant who was quite new to the social services sector commented that the quality of the Commission's reports was really good and had helped him to quickly increase his understanding of the sector:

The Commission dug into the problems and the report shows a huge depth of thinking.

However another person thought that, while the Commission had done a good job of gathering information, they hadn't developed the depth of understanding of the system that they needed. As a result, the full implications of the Commission's recommendations were yet to be unpicked.

One person was very positive about the background papers for the inquiry. These papers showed that a lot of thinking had gone on in the course of the inquiry and that issues had been considered from different angles. Other individuals commented positively on particular parts of the Commission's work:

I was impressed with Appendix D on services for people with disabilities

The report showed a good understanding of the need for person-centred services

Some of the material on commissioning was excellent.

Other comments on the analysis were:

- that it would have been useful to look at a wider range of systems from a wider range of countries, including some of a similar size to New Zealand. The examples used by the Commission seemed to focus mainly on Health and on the US

- the analysis set out the pros and cons of various options for social service delivery, however some participants considered that this balanced analysis was not always reflected in the recommendations. On social bonds, for example, one person thought that the Commission was supporting them[3] despite *"experiments with them having failed all over the world"*

- that the Commission had presented a range of tools that could be used at a local level, which was potentially very useful, however it was unclear whether the tools work

- while devolved, place-based service models had been tried here and elsewhere, it wasn't clear what the outcomes had been or the implications of

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[3] There is no recommendation in the final report that refers to social bonds. There is one finding in the final report that refers to social bonds as follows:
"F6.9 Social bonds stimulate innovation by government agencies sharing risk with investors and linking payments to outcomes without prescribing programmes in detail. They may be most useful in stimulating experimentation and testing the effectiveness of new approaches. They may not be suitable for wide application across social services."

using these approaches more widely. The Commission could usefully have done more to explore this

- that it would have been good to see some specific references to the Pacific population.

Use of the submissions

There were a range of views on how the Commission had used the material in submissions, with positive comments such as:

Our submissions were covered well in the findings and recommendations. Everything that we raised was covered off.

However others expressed a number of reservations about the way submissions had been used to support the Commission's position:

The draft report cherry-picked the submissions to support the Commission's arguments

They used a quote out of context to support an argument

They were looking for evidence to support their thinking.

Community versus private delivery

A strong theme from one discussion was that the Commission had not recognised the wider benefits arising from the use of community organisations rather than for-profit businesses for service delivery:

They have commodified a social services outcome (human need) but it doesn't work that way

There is no analysis of the impact on communities of the shift from NGOs to private provision – benefits to the community from their involvement in service delivery will be lost

Volunteers won't work for Serco.

Some group members felt that the Commission was aiming to minimise risk by recommending contracting out to the private sector – however one person commented this was unrealistic as the government is ultimately responsible.

One person commented that there had been many changes in social services in New Zealand over the last 30 years, such as the shift of aged residential care from NGOs to private provision, a similar shift of childcare into the private sector, and the benefit changes flowing from the "Mother of all budgets" in 1991. Some of these changes presented excellent opportunities which the Commission could have taken to do detailed analyses and assessments of their impacts. One example given of the impact of this shift for aged care was that older people are struggling to find residential care near to where they have been living.

Another comment was that the Commission did not give sufficient recognition to evidence showing that successful social services were founded on effective relationships between clients and appropriately skilled people.

Welfare investment approach

The Commission seemed to have reached the conclusion that the welfare investment approach was evidence-based however some group members did not agree with that. One person commented that if New Zealand is leading the world in this approach it cannot be following an evidence base, instead we are establishing that base.

One group member queried the use of the phrase "world-first Welfare Investment Approach" in the terms of reference, feeling that this approach had not been signalled, canvassed or endorsed. The phrase was described by one person as a 'slogan'.

Reprioritisation

It became clear in one focus group discussion that participants had the very strong impression that the inquiry started from the position that overall resources were fixed and that it was therefore about reprioritisation of current expenditure. This was probably quite understandable given the opening sentence in the terms of reference:

"…undertake an inquiry into enhancing productivity and value in the state sector (focusing on the purchasing of social sector services)."

This impression about the inquiry's context gave rise to some major concerns within the group about the Commission's recommendations:

- that by increasing the focus on clients in quadrant D, those in A, B and C would receive less services. Group members noted that ultimately these clients could end up in higher need categories if not given appropriate attention now, for example, mental health clients

- that if some services were to move to a fully-funded basis, others would be funded at a lower level than currently with an adverse impact on the clients of these services.

The recommendations

One comment on the recommendations was:

I found the recommendations predictable, in a good way – they responded to our submissions.

The same person hoped that the Commission's report would inform other processes going on at the same time, such as the Health Strategy and changes in MSD:

Otherwise we are just locked in a cycle of submissions.

Another comment was that while the fundamental recommendations were good, they were not very definitive and so could potentially be taken in unintended directions by the central bureaucracy. The Commission had taken a softly-softly approach, probably to keep people engaged, which was understandable, however:

The Commission could have put more of a stake in the ground

The focus on local determination needed to be stronger.

An alternative view was that the Commission might have been better to leave out the recommendations and instead provide a toolkit of approaches that had been found to work:

Recommendations sometimes get in the way.

A further cautionary comment was that there was a danger of the recommendations being taken forward without the necessary understanding of the current system. For example, the Commission may not have appreciated the implications of using different models for clients in different quadrants.

The recommendation to establish a Ministerial Committee was seen as almost essential by one participant:

It's the only way to break down the silos

We need to get away from different government departments fighting for their territory

Wellington agencies are responsive to ministers

The changes need to be enabled from the top and driven from the bottom.

A number of participants welcomed particular recommendations, eg R6.6 on full-funding and R6.14 on neutral treatment of in-house provision and contracting out.

One person cautioned that the use of navigators needed to be approached in a flexible way (eg a church minister or youth worker could be the right choice depending on the client's circumstances).

Some participants were disappointed that the Commission did not recommend the introduction of something along the lines of the *National Disability Insurance Scheme* initially recommended by the Australian Productivity Commission.

Another theme was that the inquiry would have been better to focus on doing the current job better rather than changing the whole system. One person noted a case of a benefit being cut off within 24 hours of the recipient going on a short overseas holiday. The comment was that if the current system can be that quick to respond in that circumstance, it had the potential to become more responsive to client needs.

Impact of the report

There were a variety of views expressed about how the report was being used and the impact it would have on the effectiveness of social services:

People will draw on it for some considerable time

I expect lots of ongoing discussions

The recommendations will definitely be picked-up and will make a big impact.

One perspective was that the inquiry had changed the frame of reference by coming up with ways of operating alongside and with the public service rather than instead of it. This was seen as important because in New Zealand the NGO sector does not have the capacity to take over from the public service.

One focus group member had been quoting one of the Commission's recommendations in discussions they were having with a funder, and another noted that the quadrants diagram was being used in other policy areas such as aged care and in the Health Strategy.

However several people were less optimistic about the impact the report would have:

Nothing in the report would improve the lives of people with disabilities and those in desperate situations (eg by raising their incomes)

It will generate a lot of work but not a lot of change

Agencies will respond to the recommendations but they won't be implemented

The big question is whether it will make a difference

Who will use it and what will they do with it?

Some participants talked about the "industry" that has developed to respond to the Commission's inquiries, including this one. Given that this inquiry had been commissioned by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of State Services, the report was being taken very seriously by the public sector. Departments were being asked for their responses and there was a risk that the process of responding would distract attention from getting on with other work to improve social service delivery and outcomes:

A lot of people in departments are thinking about how they will respond to the report

The report was designed to attract a response however it might have been better designed as a resource document.

Making changes in social services

There were a number of comments about the difficulty of effecting change in this area:

There is a deep resistance to change in the public service

What is needed is a wider programme to change the culture of the public sector

Change is needed at all levels – in the attitudes and expectations of clients, in the bureaucracy and with providers.

Because of these concerns, some participants would have liked to see more in the report on the process of change. Government agencies and providers may not be ready to make the recommended changes and the report's emphasis on collaboration may have needed to be stronger:

While it probably wasn't the Commission's intention, the recommendations still reflect current silos. This requires a new approach to collaboration

A discussion of the size of the change needed, and how that might happen, would have been good.

Given the recommendations for agencies to consider different models, one person talked about the importance of keeping clients and their families at the centre of the approach. The participant fed back that often clients felt that they were being treated

like 'guinea pigs' by agencies when they weren't asked to be active participants in new ways of working.

Finally, the Commission had said that after completing the report, it was now up to Ministers to decide on the next steps. However one person would have liked to know more about will happen next as a result of the inquiry as part of a feedback loop to the sector and those who had taken the time to engage in the inquiry process.

Engagement

There were many positive comments about the Commission's engagement on this inquiry:

The Commission's engagement was exemplary

They sought out people to have conversations with

There was open engagement, a genuine spirit of inquiry, and no preconceived ideas

They provided really good opportunities to meet

When we met them they looked really interested and actually listened

The engagement was quite wide-ranging and they did seem to engage with the right people

I had lots of opportunity to engage through different groups I am involved with. We could add to the questions that the Commission was asking if we felt they needed to be included

The Commission really made an effort

Everyone they spoke to really appreciated it

There was really positive feedback after the Commission's visit

The engagement was reflected in the report – they hadn't written the report first

We were pleased to find that the Commission had been following our blog

I give them 10/10.

However there were some contrary views, such as:

The Commission is really good at listening but not hearing.

Some people had been disappointed by how the Commission seemed to perceive NGOs as having a weak voice and needing to emulate the private sector in the way they advocated for their clients and organisations. Certain language used in the report was also seen as reinforcing negative perceptions about NGOs, eg describing the wider community benefits of NGO social service delivery as 'spillovers'.

One group member felt they had not had much opportunity to engage; they had been invited to join in with another group's meeting but that was unsatisfactory. At the end of the day, their engagement was essentially through the making of submissions.

Achieving wider engagement

Another comment was that, while there had been quite a lot of engagement, with the Commission meeting a whole range of people, the Commission may not have got a broad enough sweep:

There would have been wider engagement from community groups if more had been done to set the context and frame the issue

The whole inquiry wasn't made sufficiently accessible; it needed more visibility and it needed to be framed as aspirational.

One person noted that there seemed to be few submissions from Maori[4]. This was a lost opportunity as probably more Maori would have submitted if they had been supported to do so:

People may not have been aware of the impact the report could have

People may have felt that their engagement wouldn't make a difference.

The Commission may want to consider proactive ways to increase participation by Maori. An example given was opportunistic consultation such as attending other events and asking questions of the people there.

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[4] The Commission received 13 submissions from groups identifying as Maori and held 34 engagement meetings with such groups.

Delivery of Message

Participants generally acknowledged the Commission's efforts to provide a variety of materials to deliver its message including the final report, the short summaries, videos, and presentations. At the most positive end, one person thought the Commission had used every method it could to ensure that people would access its material, and was an exemplar.

The final report

There were several comments on the final report with one person saying that it was really important, and another saying that it could be a very useful resource document for the public sector. However most people felt that the length and style of the document had limited its audience:

The language was not right for community groups

The length was off-putting

The report was great for Treasury but most people would not like to have their needs described as a 'long-term liability'

Its thoroughness is also its weakness in that it confined itself to the very few people who have a fundamental role in this area

It's not clear which audience(s) the Commission is aiming at: if the audience is the public sector, then it is very effective. However, if the Commission wanted to appeal to a broad church who would then advocate change, it doesn't work.

Other comments from individual participants on the final report included:

- they would have liked to see more recognition of the content of the submissions in the final report

- the hand-drawn diagrams were memorable

- the main lasting impression was of the quadrants.

Summary versions

The shorter forms of presenting the inquiry, including the 50-page summary version, were thought to be helpful for people who didn't have a lot of time to go through the long report. However there were several comments suggesting that the short versions were not as effective as they could be:

- the very short summary documents missed some key issues and didn't do the Commission's full report justice. More work was needed to change the framing of the story in the short versions

- one person thought that *Cut to the chase* was abbreviated to the point that it said nothing

- another person thought that the potential audience for the short versions would not know where to find them

- the same language was used in the short versions and the long documents – this seemed inappropriate as the audiences were presumably different.

A significant concern expressed by one group member was that the short summary versions created an impression that the conclusions in them were supported by evidence in the final report – which they considered was not always the case.

In addition to the various reports, the Commission's efforts to appear at conferences and seminars and to conduct a roadshow were appreciated:

They came across as open and honest.

Suggestions for the Commission included:

- consider rolling out more materials, directed at particular audiences, to support the Commission's presentations. An example would be *"What does it mean for you?"* pieces directed separately at NGOs, Education, Health, MSD

- consider using different channels of communication and different tones

- given the emphasis on more personalised service provision in the inquiry, specific information targeted at particular populations would have been helpful (eg Pacific peoples, region specific).

Concluding Comments

Discussions held as part of this focus group evaluation have highlighted how the Commission is perceived by some as bringing a particular perspective, ideology, and associated set of assumptions to its inquiries. Unsurprisingly, given its name, the Commission is also seen by many as having a narrow focus on productivity. These perceptions have been unhelpful for this inquiry by:

- creating the impression that the inquiry would be narrowly focussed on "buying stuff" and "doing more for less". Some people therefore didn't understand the scope or potential impact of the inquiry

- limiting the range of people who engaged, at least at the beginning

- colouring the way that the Commission's material was read, for example –

    ° people forming the view that certain models were being recommended when they may have only been discussed

    ° people assuming that the inquiry was undertaken in the context of fixed resources overall. With this assumption in mind, some people thought that more focus on clients with complex needs would mean less funding for all other clients.

The Commission may be able to reduce these negative impacts by framing and publicising its inquiries in ways that achieve a common understanding of context, scope and potential impact. At the other end of the process, the Commission's recommendations and their implications need to be made as clear as possible, especially where there is the potential for misunderstandings.

Another theme from the discussions was the question of what happens after the Commission has completed an inquiry. The impact on the public sector came through quite strongly in comments, in particular those about the "industry" that has developed to respond to this and other inquiries. While the public sector is busy responding, others who have engaged in the inquiry may be left wondering what is going to happen next.

For future inquiries, the Commission may want to consider:

- how the shape and nature of its reports can facilitate the most effective response from the public sector

- what it can do to keep other participants in its inquiries informed of next steps.