It is recommended that:

1. Investment be made in joint workforce development, including the development of a common set of values, standards and protocols, but not at the expense of service delivery to children.

2. Positive and effective approaches to service delivery and community building be shared and their use encouraged.

THIRVING, BELONGING AND ACHIEVING: WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

In his introduction to the Green Paper, the Prime Minister invited New Zealanders to share their ideas on how we can do better for vulnerable children. A large number and wide variety of agencies and individuals responded.

The submissions demonstrate a strong desire to do better for all children in New Zealand. And there is a wealth of knowledge and ideas within the submissions as to what this will take.

It is now Government’s job, through the laws and policies it creates, to ensure New Zealand becomes “a society where children can grow up happily fulfilling their potential.” (Submission from Sisters of Mercy, Wiri)

That will take political will, genuine partnerships amongst government agencies, professionals, communities and families, and the same steadfast commitment to children’s wellbeing as is evident in submissions on the Green Paper.

“...there is no cause which merits a higher priority than the protection and development of children, in whom the survival, stability and advancement of all nations—and indeed of human civilization—depends.” (Plan of Action from the World Summit for Children 1990)

INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS BRIEFING PAPER?

The number of submissions to the 2011 “Green Paper for Vulnerable Children” shows the importance of child wellbeing to New Zealanders. Submissions reflected deep concern about the limited action over recent decades to improve the situation for children. The submissions are testament to the level of individual and organisational commitment to progress child and family wellbeing. And there are striking synergies amongst submissions. They call for:

• An Action Plan for all children
• Priority to be given to investing in children and their wellbeing
• Increased emphasis on proactively looking for ways to support families and communities in their role of nurturing children
• Work to eliminate violence in families and communities and address inequities, especially child poverty.

The most common theme in submissions is that the best way to do better for vulnerable children is to do better for all children. This briefing paper has been developed to present a unified position statement, based on the common themes from submissions, on what it will take for every child to thrive and belong.

While reviews of services and policies are needed, they must be carried out with due care, and not in isolation

WHAT ARE THE COMMON THEMES?

There is wide support for the Green Paper’s vision that “every child in New Zealand thrives, belongs and achieves.” It is important to New Zealanders that, as a society, we care for our children well. Changes must:

• Be proactive, strengths-based, respectful and supportive of the inherent dignity of the child
• Give effect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
• Aim to improve the wellbeing of all children
• Aim to prevent maltreatment as well as responding effectively to abuse and neglect
• Promote investment in children.

All children, whatever their circumstances or experience, are vulnerable. Children’s wellbeing, for better or worse, depends largely on circumstances which are beyond their control and which can change at any time. The narrow definition of vulnerability implied in the questions asked in each of the Green Paper’s sections limits effective provision of services to enhance children’s wellbeing and minimise their vulnerability.

A far wider view needs to be taken for the Green Paper’s vision to be achieved. Categorising some children as vulnerable can undermine their sense of belonging and fail to recognise or strengthen their resilience. It also risks missing out children who need assistance because they are not categorised as vulnerable.

Child abuse is the predominant concern of the Green Paper but neglect is an insidious, harmful experience for many children that is not a focus in the Green Paper.

The factors that lie behind child abuse are much the same as those that lie behind other poor outcomes for children.

Child abuse can be most effectively reduced through policies that benefit all children. What needs to be well considered is how best to address factors that contribute to good outcomes for children, including those which address parents’ stress, initiatives to promote positive parenting, and a range of interventions relevant to the common and diverse needs of all children.

While reviews of services and policies are needed, they must be carried out with due care, and not in isolation.
Children will thrive, belong and achieve when:

1. Government acknowledges the value children bring, and their rights of children, families and whanau.
2. Parents are fully supported to meet their responsibilities by having access to a wide range of free or affordable support services.
3. Community-led initiatives are encouraged and enabled.
4. Local government is recognized as having a critical social role in local communities.

“Children of their actions, their policies and their decisions – whatever they might be – need them now. It is not acceptable that children miss out on the basis of a vague future promise of ‘effective assessment, better allocation of services and reduced waiting times’.”

Submission from Child Poverty Action Group

## SHARING RESPONSIBILITIES – WHAT WILL IT TAKE?##

Children will thrive, belong and achieve when they live and learn in places and environments that enable children to thrive, achieve and belong.

1. Government acknowledges and meets its fundamental responsibility by shaping, maintaining and promoting a child and family friendly society.
2. Parents are fully supported to meet their responsibilities by having access to a wide range of free or affordable support services.
3. Community-led initiatives are encouraged and enabled.
4. Local government is recognized as having a critical social role in local communities.

## SHOWING LEADERSHIP – WHAT WILL IT TAKE?##

Effective leadership requires policy and legislation that values and respects children, and ensures that they are well protected, from harm and able to participate in their family, community and social life.

Developing an Action Plan for all children, not just those regarded as vulnerable, would demonstrate leadership by symbolising the value we attach to children and setting expectations of what childhood should be like for children in New Zealand.

It would provide an overarching, coherent strategy for policy and practice affecting children across the whole of government, and help to align efforts to ensure every child thrives, belongs and achieves.

“We submit that enabling all New Zealand children to Thrive, to Belong and to Achieve requires a shift in our national cultural attitudes to children, and so to family. It requires acceptance of the individual responsibility for our own children, the responsibility of parenthood – and of responsibility for other children – community awareness, community support and creating equal opportunities for adults of all backgrounds.”

Submission from Analytics

It is recommended that:

1. Government supports and strengthens families and their relationships with children, and supports parents in their day-to-day child-rearing responsibilities for community wellbeing, including place-basedEarly childhood education and care

Good quality research is needed, but it must be based on a wider definition of what constitutes ‘evidence’, including multiple method research programmes that include qualitative approaches and formative evaluation. These are more appropriate to assessing complex communities and the value of community initiated initiatives that warrant further exploration.

What is essential is that high quality research looking at long-term outcomes and addressing the importance of context be appropriately funded, rather than relying on hastily and short-term low level research.

## CHILD-CENTRED POLICY – WHAT WILL IT TAKE?##

Policy will be child centred when the safety, wellbeing and rights of children is the central consideration in policy development. Some of the directions identified in the Green Paper have the potential to improve outcomes for children, but some must be carefully assessed to ensure that change does not mean that some children miss out on what they need, or that local knowledge, trust and relationships are lost.

Some of the policies identified in the Green Paper warrant further development, as they offer potential to advance the best interests of children. These policies include:

- the use of evidence to assess the effectiveness of services
- a greater focus on intervention early in the life of a problem and in children’s early childhood (but not at the expense of cuts in services for other children, or of services for young people)
- a law change to enhance information sharing (along with protocols and education)
- improved processes for monitoring children and families (with an equal focus on building supportive, trusting relationships between families and those best able to help and support them)
- mandatory reporting is not a quick fix, and if implemented, will require extensive education and support for those affected. A legal requisite alone may do more harm than good.

Some of the policies signaled in the Green Paper are strongly opposed in submissions, because of their potential to undermine the wellbeing of children. These policies include:

- eroding universal base services in order to increase targeting, rather than using a system of progressive or proportionate universalism.
- prioritising some children to receive services, at the cost of other children who will fall between the cracks.

More investment in children is needed, not just shifting scarce resources around. Child-centred policy would see new investment coming from areas of government spending outside the current allocation for children, and new revenue gathering.

It is recommended that:

1. An Action Plan for all children in New Zealand be developed and implemented
2. The Action Plan for all children:
   a. address all aspects of children’s well-being
   b. apply across all government agencies and services
   c. be underpinned by legislation for implementation, accountability and sustainability.

## CHILD-CENTRED PRACTICE – WHAT WILL IT TAKE?##

Child-centred practice requires all people who work with or for children and families to be highly skilled in their specialties (such as teaching, nursing, specialist therapy, social work, youth and whanau work, law, youth aid policy development and implementation). They also need to:

- share common ethical and practice standards and protocols
- have manageable workloads and good working conditions
- receive ongoing support, supervision and professional development
- have work appropriately valued.

The suggestion in the Green Paper that availability of services may need to be compromised so that more resources can be put into workforce development needs to be regarded with extreme caution. Children cannot wait for the services they need.

Services will be effective and well used when they:

- are easy to access, affordable and can be delivered in a timely manner when they are needed
- are inspired and supported by and connected to community led initiatives
- are delivered in culturally appropriate ways
- are strong based and empowering
- wrap around the family not the individual
- work collaboratively
- are adequately funded.

Some excellent examples incorporating these approaches exist in Aotearoa New Zealand. Mentors, use of lead workers and the development of community hubs can be positive initiatives that warrant further evaluation, support and development.