

25 November 2022

Judge Frances Eivers
Children's Commissioner
Office of the Children's Commissioner
PO Box 5610
Wellington 6145

Sent via email: [REDACTED]

Tēnā koe Frances

RE: Proposal to increase the capacity of Epuni Care and Protection Residence

Thank you for your letter dated 18 November 2022 regarding the proposal to temporarily increase the capacity in Epuni Care and Protection Residence from ten to 15 tamariki.

The proposal to temporarily increase the capacity in Epuni is not a decision we are taking lightly. We believe it is a necessary step to ensure we are able to provide a safe, short-term intervention for an increasing number of tamariki aged 13 and under who are driving cars and participating in other offending-type behaviours in the community. These tamariki are presenting with significant levels of risk to themselves and others and we are greatly concerned about their safety and the safety of those around them. These tamariki are also at risk of becoming engaged in the Youth Justice system.

I can assure you that this option is only one in a suite of options that we are developing and considering in response to this arising need.

I appreciate the concerns you have raised for these tamariki, as well as the impact on those already at Epuni. I have addressed each of your questions below.

At present, how many mokopuna is Oranga Tamariki intending to send to Epuni?

The proposal is to increase the capacity from ten to 15 tamariki in Epuni. This will mean an additional five tamariki will be referred to Epuni over the next ten weeks.

What is the current legal status, age, gender, and Iwi of each of the mokopuna identified for placement at Epuni?

Decisions have not been made about the specific tamariki that would be placed at Epuni as part of this increase in capacity. As at 22 November 2022, 13 tamariki have a referral for a placement in a Care and Protection Residence. Of this, seven tamariki (6 tama and 1 kōtiro) are aged 11 to 13 and have vehicle-related offending behaviour, including stealing and driving cars. Three are tamariki Māori and whakapapa to Ngāpuhi.

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Tamariki referred to Care and Protection Residences require a care status that include sections 78, 101, 139, and 140 of the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989.

When does Oranga Tamariki expect to start to place the mokopuna in Epuni?

Based on the current resources available, the Residence Manager in Epuni has confirmed that there is the capacity to provide care for up to 12 tamariki. As recruitment and training of new kaimahi progresses, we expect to increase the capacity to 15 tamariki over the next 10 weeks.

The Epuni Residence Manager, with the support of the Residential Services team, is responsible for ensuring a safe environment for tamariki and kaimahi is maintained in alignment with the increased capacity.

Where are these mokopuna placed while awaiting placement in Epuni?

Tamariki who are referred to Care and Protection Residences are currently in a variety of care settings. These include placed with their whānau, with Oranga Tamariki or non-government organisation caregivers, and in emergency housing options such as motels. Some tamariki may also be transient (living in various homes with friends, associates etc).

Why has the decision been made to place these mokopuna in Epuni rather than work with their whānau and community to keep them in their homes or in the community?

Oranga Tamariki focuses on identifying safe options for care with whānau in the community in the first instance, however in some circumstances this is not always possible. For the group of tamariki who are referred for a placement in a Care and Protection Residence the levels of risk, both to themselves and to others in their community, is extremely high and there are no available safe options for them in their own community.

What interventions have been put in place to respond to the behaviours and needs of these mokopuna in consultation with their whānau and their communities? I expect this to be a matter of priority and in the nature of an intensive service.

Working with whānau and partners in communities to develop the necessary supports for tamariki is the immediate priority in responding to the needs for tamariki who are driving cars and offending in the community.

The wraparound support for tamariki in their own communities is a focus wherever possible. In situations when the risk is significant and tamariki are placed in a Care and Protection Residence, the connection with whānau and supports for tamariki continues. We do this by ensuring whānau can visit the residence to be with tamariki and by bringing together the group of people providing support to tamariki weekly in Multi Agency Team meetings.

When there is a planned admission, there is often already a team of support established around tamariki. Where the admission is an emergency, we will work at the earliest opportunity to ensure this support is put in place.

What work has been done to find safe and supportive placements with whānau whanui if these mokopuna cannot stay with their parents?

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If tamariki are unable to have their care needs met by their parents or usual carers, we work proactively and closely in partnership with the individual te tamaiti, their family, whānau, hapū, iwi and family group to establish safe, stable and loving care for them. Preference is given to a home within the family, whānau, hapū, iwi or family group of te tamaiti that can address and meet their needs, including a safe, stable and loving home.

The decision to make a referral for a placement for tamariki in a residence is not one that is made lightly. Prior to that decision being taken, social workers will explore opportunities for placement with whānau whanui. This involves thorough understanding of the needs and history of the tamariki and listening to the tamariki and family, involving a kairaranga-a-whānau. Our practice approach is informed by our Māori cultural framework and grounded in Te Toka Tūmoana. When working with children of Pacific descent, our practice approach is grounded in Va'aifetū.

What support will be made available to whānau whilst these mokopuna are at Epuni?

Connecting with whānau is a key priority when tamariki are placed in Epuni. The social worker for the tamaiti and the team in Epuni work together to ensure that this happens. This contact includes making sure regular phone calls and face-to-face visits happen. Residences fund the travel and accommodation for whānau to come and visit their tamaiti. The whānau flats in Epuni are used for whānau to come and stay on site. There are multiple other accommodation options nearby as needed. Where safe, whānau are encouraged to take tamariki offsite and enjoy spending time together in the local community.

In terms of 7AA of the Act, please identify whether any of the mokopuna are from Iwi with which you have a strategic partnership, and what discussions have taken place with those partners around care of these mokopuna in the community?

Three of the tamariki currently referred for a Care and Protection placement with vehicle-related offending behaviour whakapapa to Ngāpuhi. As noted above, our social workers explore all community-based options and solutions before a referral for a residence placement is made. This includes working with whānau and our community partners, including strategic partners, to support tamariki and provide wraparound services within their own community wherever possible.

I note your call for collaboration between agencies to find local solutions. I can assure you that this occurring at a number of levels.

A Youth Engagement Ministers Group has been established to provide joint oversight of a focused, more integrated, cross-agency response to high levels of disengagement and localised spikes in offending behaviour.

As part of this work, Regional Public Service Commissioners have a key role in bringing agencies, iwi and community providers together to draw on the strengths of their community, jointly assess the underlying issues impacting their tamariki and develop Regional Action Plans in response.

A specific example of this in action is the Kotahi te Whakaaro approach recently established by the South Auckland Social Wellbeing Board, to respond to vehicle-related offending among young people. All children under 14 years who are apprehended as a result of a

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fleeing driver and/or ram-raid or other serious offending who live in Counties-Manukau are referred to Kotahi te Whakaaro. The approach is designed to prevent escalation into or through the Youth Justice system.

Kotahi te Whakaaro members include Police, Oranga Tamariki, Counties Manukau Health, Education, Kāinga Ora, the Ministry of Social Development, local non-government agencies, and Te Iwi o Ngāti Kahu. Cases are reviewed and information shared in a 'joined-up' response. Agencies meet the same day to identify those with the best relationship with the young person and their whānau. A joint visit is made to understand needs and plan an appropriate response. Other agencies such as health, education or social services are linked in to provide a well-coordinated, sequenced and wraparound response for the young person and their whānau with prioritised supports as required.

I trust you find this information useful. If you have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact me directly, or alternatively Nicolette Dickson, Deputy Chief Executive Quality, Practice and Experiences on [REDACTED]

Nāku noa, nā



Chappie Te Kani

Te Tumu Whakarae mō ngā Tamariki | Secretary for Children