



# OPERATION AND EXPERIENCE

Formative evaluation  
of the *Transition from Care  
to Independence Service*



**ORANGA TAMARIKI  
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The Oranga Tamariki Evidence Team works to build the evidence base that helps us better understand wellbeing and what works to improve outcomes for New Zealand's children, young people and their whānau.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Overview

This report details aggregate findings from a formative evaluation of two Auckland-based Transition from Care to Independence (TCI) services – Launch and Ka Awatea. The original impetus for this evaluation was the Modernising Child, Youth and Family Expert Panel Final Report, which highlighted a need to better support young people transitioning from statutory care to independent living. This report, along with further work from the Investing in Children Programme, identified these specialist TCI services as pockets of apparent good practice, which have the potential to inform the design of a national transition support service.

As an input to future service design work, this evaluation was designed to better understand how TCI services are operating on-the-ground, including key success factors and any challenges faced. The evaluation also sought to understand how young people experience the service and any outcomes they report, along with gathering feedback from others involved in its delivery. A cross section of people involved in existing TCI services were interviewed, including: 15 young people, 10 staff members, six social workers, and two key stakeholders from within Oranga Tamariki.

Key findings from the evaluation are detailed below. These findings are primarily descriptive, and mirror a young person's pathway into, through, and out of, the TCI service.

## How young people get involved

### **Young people are referred to the TCI service by social workers, who consider a range of factors when making this decision**

Social workers will usually refer young people who:

- have a permanency goal of Transition to Independence
- lack a network of natural supports, including a parent who is able to provide safe and appropriate care
- may benefit from a community-based service to build living skills and resilience
- are in an unsafe or unstable living situation with whānau.

Social workers will not usually refer young people who:

- have a stable living situation and strong support network
- are highly functioning and do not require on-going support
- are not motivated to engage with the service
- are able to access specialist support within the adult disability system.

The decision to refer a young person includes a degree of discretion, with feedback suggesting that practice can vary across social workers, or be influenced by resource constraints. For example, some social workers stated that the existence of limited whānau support may be used to justify not referring a young person to TCI.

Social workers stated that they often consulted with peers, supervisors and site managers when considering whether to refer a young person. Advice around eligibility may also be sought from Regional Office members of a TCI Reference Group. The ability to take this consultative approach was highly valued by social workers, and may be associated with more consistent and transparent referral decision-making.

## **After the social worker's decision has been made, young people progress through a staged referral process**

After deciding to refer a young person to the TCI service, the social worker completes a request for assessment form, which outlines key background information and initial content relating to a young person's goals, or what they hope to achieve through engaging with the service.

This request for assessment is triaged at the Auckland Regional Office by a TCI Reference Group member. Here, young people closer to the age at which statutory care orders lapse, or those with high needs, have their assessment prioritised.

TCI workers then undertake a needs assessment for each referral, which outlines a holistic range of information (e.g. background, living situation, wellbeing, connections), along with a young person's goals and the characteristics of their preferred TCI worker. The evaluation found:

- Young people often referred to the needs assessments as an 'interview', which they had to pass in order to work with TCI.
- While social workers are expected to discuss participation prior to referral, for some young people, the needs assessment was their first exposure to the service, and they may not be motivated to engage.
- From a practical perspective, needs assessments are often difficult to organise.
- Social workers thought that needs assessments completed by TCI workers were more youth-centred and impartial.

Completed needs assessments are considered by the TCI Reference Group, which includes Regional Office staff and site managers, representatives from both TCI providers, and practice experts. The majority of young people are accepted onto the service. Exceptions are if a young person has moved out of Auckland, or the group agrees they already have access to appropriate support. The Reference Group also guides decisions around which TCI advisor a young person works with.

## **Overall, the referral process was thought to be well-functioning, however, a number of key challenges were identified**

Interviews with TCI workers highlighted a perception that social workers do not always refer young people to the service for the 'right' reasons:

- TCI staff noted social workers do not consistently make proactive referrals, and tend to perceive the service as 'the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff'.
- Staff noted social workers may perceive that a referral to the service absolves their responsibility for a young person's welfare, particularly around accommodation.

Discussion with TCI workers revealed a perception that young people with complex needs, including foetal alcohol syndrome and high levels of disability, are increasingly referred to the service. Staff highlighted the limitations of the service for these young people, noting TCI does not have the capacity to provide specialist clinical support.

TCI staff cited the importance of receiving comprehensive information about a young person prior to engagement, and noted variability in the quality and quantity of what is received. Staff had mixed

feedback on the potential benefit of accessing CYRAS<sup>1</sup>, stating that while it could reduce reliance on social workers providing relevant information, it may bias how TCI workers approach young people.

The existence of long waiting lists, which result from providers having limited capacity to undertake assessments and accept new referrals, was identified as a key challenge facing the service.

Timeliness issues have a number of implications:

- Young people lose their motivation/enthusiasm to engage.
- Young people move out of Auckland (where the service is not available) or the service cannot contact them.
- Young people are matched with TCI workers on the basis of availability, rather than suitability.
- TCI staff cannot publicise or discuss the service with social workers, as the additional demand this generates cannot be met.

Feedback about the role of the TCI Reference Group was mixed. Some participants stated that the Reference Group element of the referral process added complexity, exacerbated timeliness issues, and was redundant for some young people. Positive perceptions included the relationship between collective decision-making and transparency/consistency, the importance of the Reference Group as a practice forum, and the value of having a means of escalating issues relating to local sites.

## What the support looks like

### The TCI service supports young people by taking a 'youth-led' approach

In the context of TCI, 'youth-led' means work is orientated around a young person's individual goals, with the service also giving them the autonomy to decide what these goals are. This approach was seen as distinct from how social workers approach young people, in that it is more responsive, creative and flexible, and is not restricted by the need to operate within a statutory environment.

### The service provides young people with a range of practical support

This support includes:

- Collaboratively developing a Transition Plan, which evolves over time, and supports young people to identify and achieve goals.
- Offering young people tangible forms of support (e.g. driver's licence, clothing, bank account, transport), which provides a foundation for growing their independence and encourages broader engagement with the service.
- Supporting young people in crisis situations (e.g. self-harm or suicide ideation) and meeting their immediate safety needs, including ensuring access to nutrition.
- Facilitating access to accommodation. Despite its importance for young people's wellbeing, finding safe and stable housing was identified as a key challenge for the service.
- Supporting young people to identify and engage with community-based supports (e.g. education, health services, counselling), or directly procuring these services.

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<sup>1</sup> CYRAS is Oranga Tamariki's main case management system. It provides for all Care and Protection, Youth Justice, Residential and Adoption Services (CYRAS) task recording requirements.

- Providing practical support to young people wanting to explore their sense of identity, particularly as it relates to culture and whakapapa. This work was identified as an area of potential improvement for the service.
- Organising group work and giving young people the opportunity to engage in collective activities. This form of practical support was seen to have a number of positive implications for young people, and was highly valued.

### **TCl staff work to establish supportive, positive and trusting relationships with young people**

Along with providing practical forms of support, TCl staff work with young people to establish and build a strong relationship. This process is often informal and occurs over the long-term. The persistence and attitude of TCl staff were identified as key success factors within the relationship-building process. Important characteristics for TCl staff included being: honest, relaxed, non-judgemental, empathetic and reliable.

### **Providing young people with relationship-based support is a fundamental component of the service**

This support includes:

- Allowing young people to access unconditional, on-going, and therapeutic support, which is akin to having a family member available. This support was highly valued by young people.
- Providing young people with mentoring support, which helps them learn from past experiences and understand the consequences of their behaviour.
- Working with young people to identify and develop a network of natural supports (e.g. with whānau, peers, or other members of the community). Despite the importance of having sustainable relationships outside of TCl for young peoples' wellbeing, engagement within the community – and particularly with whānau – was identified as a potential area of improvement for the service.

### **A number of factors that help or hinder the delivery of the TCl service were identified**

Factors that help the TCl service include:

- Having a framework or model to guide practice.
- Staff working autonomously and taking a creative approach when engaging with young people.
- Mobile working within the community.
- Building relationships with community-based NGOs.
- Regular access to training, supervision and clinical support.
- A positive and supportive team culture.
- Collaboration between TCl staff and social workers.
- The long duration of the service (in some cases, up to five years).
- The quality, motivation, and skill-set of TCl workers.

Factors that hinder the TCl service include:

- Limited funding and/or a lack of clarity around funding sources.
- High staff turnover rates (often associated with low pay and a lack of advancement opportunities).
- Caseloads that exceed optimum rates.

- Challenges accessing Work and Income support for young people.
- Limited collaboration between TCI providers.
- Poor communication from social workers.
- Limited engagement between young people and social workers, and a lack of on-going support from Oranga Tamariki.
- Young people being referred to the service at an older age, which limits the duration of their engagement with the service.

## Moving to independence

### Young people exit from the service in different ways

Engagement in the TCI service is voluntary, and young people can exit from the service at any time. The evaluation found that young people may cycle through periods of disengagement and reengagement, and that the ability to take this approach was highly valued.

TCI staff and young people work through a staged exit process, which is implemented at the earliest opportunity (ideally, up to a year prior to exit). Given the duration and intensity of the service, and the relationship between a young person and their TCI worker, this staged approach was seen as essential to a successful transition.

The formal exit policy for the TCI service states that young people should be discharged at age 20. While this approach is appropriate in many cases, the evaluation found that the service continues to support some young people post-20, and that a longer service duration was favoured by many participants.

### 'Success' within the service was identified as variable and subjective

TCI staff stated that 'success' was a subjective notion, which must acknowledge each young person's individual context and goals, and be framed as progress along a pathway, rather than as an objective state. Staff argued that this conception of success was difficult to measure, and that some outcomes (e.g. teenage parenthood) were often wrongly assumed as inherently negative.

### Young people defined 'independence' primarily as self-sufficiency, and identified a number of outcomes they wished to achieve

Young people's reflections on 'independence' emphasised the idea of being able to stand on your own two feet. While young people commonly stated that they would still accept support, not having to rely on other people was seen as a key aspect of achieving independence.

Young people identified a number of outcomes they hoped to achieve, or had already achieved, through their involvement in the TCI service. These outcomes related to: budgeting, accommodation, employment, having a driver's license, personal hygiene, education attendance, and nutrition. Young people also often identified a specific career-related goal, which provided motivation as they moved towards independence.

## Conclusion and recommendations

### Overall, feedback on the TCI service was generally positive

Young people had consistently positive feedback on the service, stating they enjoyed it and would not change anything. Young people credited TCI with supporting them to build independent living skills, and many stated it had made a huge difference in their life.



Feedback from TCI staff was universally positive, with workers arguing the current service had real value, and all young people should be provided with support throughout the transition period.

The majority of social workers had a positive impression of the service, describing the support provided as of a high standard. Some social workers had more negative perceptions, stating they did not understand how the service operated or the nature of the support provided to young people.

Inconsistent understandings of the service's activities and intent were noted across TCI providers and social workers. These varied interpretations may contribute to differing impressions of the service's overall effectiveness.

### **The evaluation identified several recommendations for future service design work**

This evaluation found that existing TCI services are considered well-functioning and effective, and may provide an appropriate basis for a national transition support model. However, future service design work should consider the following recommendations.

#### *Suggested improvements to the referral process*

- Improve the consistency of social worker referral decision-making, including through exploring the potential for universal referral.
- Ensure all young people are given appropriate and consistent information throughout the referral process.
- Improve the timeliness of the referral process.
- Review the status of the TCI Reference Group as a decision-making body.

#### *Suggested improvements to how young people are supported by the TCI service*

- Improve the support offered to young people with high clinical needs.
- Explore options for enhancing accommodation support.
- Establish and/or strengthen partnerships between iwi and TCI providers.
- Recognise the importance of group work and activities, and ensure this support is adequately funded.
- Improve work to identify and establish young peoples' networks of natural support.
- Introduce greater flexibility around the age young people exit from the service.

#### *Suggested improvements for supporting the delivery of the TCI service*

- Update contracting arrangements to reflect the relationship-based nature of the service.
- Empower TCI staff to better support the needs and stability of young peoples' whānau.
- Consider how to recruit and retain effective front-line staff.
- Consider introducing a set of principles to guide practice and service delivery.
- Ensure performance monitoring accounts for subjective interpretations of success.

#### *Recommendations for improving collaboration between Oranga Tamariki and TCI providers*

- Establish a shared understanding of how the service is intended to support young people.
- Clarify the on-going engagement of social workers after referring to the service.