Moving Mountains

Insights from three kaupapa Māori child protection organisations during a time of significant change

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He mihi

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Introduction

In 2017, child protection legislation was passed which was intended to begin a new era of collaboration between Māori and the Crown. Section 7AA of the Oranga Tamariki Act enabled strategic partnerships to be formed between Oranga Tamariki (New Zealand's statutory child protection agency) and iwi and Māori organisations. Section 7AA also required Oranga Tamariki to reduce disparities for tamariki Māori in contact with the child protection system, as well as to uphold the principles of te Tiriti o Waitangi. When it came into force in 2019, iwi social service providers were quick to express interest in establishing the partnerships enabled by this new provision. Ten iwi and Māori organisations subsequently did so between 2019 and 2023.

The opportunity for new forms of collaboration was cause for optimism, but the story since then has not been smooth. A change in government in 2023 led to the eventual repeal of section 7AA, amidst a wider range of legislative changes widely regarded as anti-Māori and anti-te Tiriti o Waitangi. The Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 still retains provisions enabling co-operation between iwi and Māori organisations and the Crown, and much of the work established under while section 7AA was in force continues in some form, but the landscape relating to iwi and Māori involvement within the statutory child protection system has undoubtedly shifted once again.

This report examines that shift, through a multiple case study involving three iwi-based organisations who signed a strategic partnership with Oranga Tamariki while section 7AA was in force. It forms one part of a wider research project on the decolonisation of the child protection system. The intent of this part of the project was to examine the ways in which kaupapa Māori organisations have provided services for tamariki Māori in child protection contexts, illustrate some of the successes and challenges they have experienced, and explore how the shift towards a 'by Māori, for Māori' child protection system could be better supported. This part of the project also sought to explore whether the term 'decolonisation' is a useful way of describing that shift.

The premise of this research is that the Māori-led child protection system already exists. The wider project which these case studies form part of argues that the decolonisation of the state child protection system is necessary. This part of the project, in contrast, illustrates that decolonisation is also possible, because it is already underway. Māori organisations like the three featured in this report have already been working in communities for decades to ensure that tamariki and whānau are safe. That work began long before section 7AA was passed, and continues after its repeal.

The case studies in this report are not intended to capture every aspect of the work of the three organisations featured. They were conducted with a small group of representatives from each organisation, and though each group of representatives included leaders in their organisations it is important to note that they do not represent the views of the iwi as a whole. Nor do they canvas every challenge each organisation has faced, or each success they have achieved. Rather, the case studies provide a snapshot of the work, taken at a time of significant change. Initial interviews for the case studies were conducted in 2024, after the repeal of section 7AA had been announced, but before it had come into force.

As discussed further below, six themes were identified from the case studies. The first of these was longevity and resilience – as already discussed, the commitment of these organisations to the safety of tamariki and whānau dates back far longer than section 7AA itself. The second was tikanga – unsurprisingly for kaupapa Māori organisations, these groups all ground their work in tikanga Māori, and specifically in the tikanga of the iwi they represent. Thirdly, mana motuhake – all three organisations are explicitly, and strategically, working towards a future in which mana Māori motuhake is achieved. Fourthly, frustration and pragmatism – working with the Crown has been time consuming, inequitable and frustrating, but iwi are largely just 'getting on with it', and there have still been glimmers of hope. Fifthly, effectiveness and leadership – despite section 7AA only being in force for a very short time, and despite the challenges they experienced, these organisations were able to demonstrate the successes they have had. And finally, kupu māori – there may be terms other than 'decolonisation' which resonate more strongly for those doing this work in describing what they do. Te ao Māori-centred terms like mana motuhake and whakapapa may be a simpler way to describe the necessity to shift from the Crown-led child protection system to the Māori-led one.

As the Māori-Crown relationship continues to shift, both broadly in relation to te Tiriti and specifically in relation to child protection, insights on how this work can be made more effective from those who are at its frontline must remain at the forefront of discussions about reform. This report does not attempt to find the exact blueprint for those future reforms, but the hope is that illustrating some of the experiences of kaupapa Māori child protection organisations during a significant time of change can provide a foundation for that wider conversation.

As will be seen in the discussion below, an overarching theme throughout the case studies is that of time. The organisations, people and commuities which form the Māori child protection system seem to have a different sense of time to their equivalents within the state-centred system – they were here before that system was created, and they will be here after it is gone. They understand the challenge ahead, but, as one participant described it, "they are quite used to moving mountains." This is just one of the more fundamental ways in which the two systems seem to differ, as the case studies below illustrate. The next section of this report examines those case studies in more detail, before returning to the question of what they say as a whole.

Case Study One – Mokopuna Ora

"At the heart of what we're doing it's about whakapapa. It's a taonga, it comes from a whaanau, hapuu, iwi perspective, so it is hugely important for the tribe."[1]

"Let's create this, let's take it somewhere"

Mokopuna Ora was established with a clear vision: "All Waikato mokopuna will thrive in a safe and nurturing whaanau environment, further strengthened by their hapuu and iwi whakapapa."[2]

The origins of Mokopuna Ora, and the partnership between Oranga Tamariki and Waikato-Tainui, trace back to a tono from the Minister of Social Development in 2012, which underscored the urgent need to address the high number of Maaori children in care. This resulted in a memorandum of understanding signed in 2013 between Waikato-Tainui and the Crown, the initial focus of which was on integrating iwi support advisors, who worked independently as iwi representatives within Child, Youth and Family (as it was then known). When Oranga Tamariki was established in 2017, the relationship with Waikato-Tainui continued, with the Memorandum of Understanding providing the foundation.

Despite this promising start, the early stages of Mokopuna Ora encountered challenges. Resource allocation from the Crown was insufficient, and in the early stages of Oranga Tamariki's existence, the approach was often driven by the agency's directives. From the perspective of those involved on the Waikato-Tainui side, the process often felt dictated by the Crown. Unsurprisingly, this imbalance created friction and impeded progress. Resources and support were sporadically applied, leading to a lack of momentum and premature celebrations of incomplete achievements.

"Early on it felt like typically the Crown were dictating the way we should go. It didn't feel like a lot of autonomy was being given."

In 2016, an evaluation of the work undertaken to date was conducted by Waikato-Tainui, followed by a second evaluation, conducted by Oranga Tamariki, in 2018. As a result, Oranga Tamariki pushed for an increased emphasis on using the partnership to prioritise caregiver recruitment, which had been identified as a priority for Oranga Tamariki following its establishment. A bespoke support process was developed to recruit caregivers, which Oranga Tamariki viewed really positively.

[1] N.b. in accordance with the convention generally used within the Waikato rohe, this section uses double vowels where relevant rather than tohutō (macrons), which are used elsewhere.
[2] https://waikatotainui.com/hapori/mokopuna-ora/.

"In just a few waananga, Waikato-Tainui was able to recruit more caregivers than Oranga Tamariki could achieve an entire year. This was seen as a huge success."

But despite their efforts and success in recruiting caregivers, the process faced challenges. The preparation and follow-up work by Oranga Tamariki was poorly managed, and there was a sense that Oranga Tamariki did not adequately address feedback or make necessary improvements. Although Waikato-Tainui had multiple methods of engaging with whaanau, a bottleneck occurred because Oranga Tamariki struggled to match high interest with available placements. The agency's vetting processes lacked alignment with the expectations and experiences of the whaanau involved, leading to trust issues and delays. As one kaimahi from Waikato-Tainui said, "there were multiple instances where there was a level of urgency for the placement of children, and beds were sought, placements were made, without considering the full context of the family unit." Successful placements were put through the system without sufficient follow-up, leaving those involved feeling inadequately supported.

"Oranga Tamariki were driving to set it up when it wasn't quite there yet. There was this massive acceleration."

Whaanau were sometimes contacted directly by Oranga Tamariki staff unfamiliar with the kaupapa, leading to vulnerable situations where they did not know what they were agreeing to. This lack of clarity and support made the process feel exploitative at times. The iwi was increasingly concerned about reputational risk, due to the apparent focus on merely finding a bed for children, rather than working collaboratively with whaanau to determine the best interests of whaanau and mokopuna. One kaimahi described this approach as a service-provider relationship, as opposed to an equal partnership.

The push to place children without considering the full context led to the decision to seek a reset. The iwi could see the impact that these practices were having on mokopuna and whaanau and knew things could be different. The iwi decided to revisit the recommendations from the earlier evaluations, to redefine what a true partnership could look like.

"Oranga Tamariki needed to be reminded what a Te Tiriti partnership actually is."

"We are not a service provider, we are a partner"

These experiences in this first phase of partnership led to a reset of the relationship between Waikato-Tainui and Oranga Tamariki in 2019. In the words of one kaimahi, a part of that change was that Waikato-Tainui demanded respect as an equal partner. This shift was driven by a renewed strategic focus on mokopuna within the iwi. The iwi's response to previous challenges was to say that "we are not a service provider, we are a partnership, and this is not a partner."

That had begun to change by the time a strategic partnership agreement was signed in 2019, the year that section 7AA of the Oranga Tamariki Act came into force. Section 7AA enabled the

formalisation of the relationship between Oranga Tamariki and Waikato-Tainui at that higher level. This agreement, which was one of the earliest strategic partnerships the agency signed, aimed to formally establish a more respectful relationship between Oranga Tamariki and Waikato-Tainui. Working in partnership, the Mokopuna Ora Sustainability Project was developed, based on the recommendations of the earlier evaluations. This involved detailed planning, including budget considerations, problem statements, and timelines, all of which was supported by a specialist Oranga Tamariki Project Manager. This was a key example of what the partnership could entail when done well. Since signing the strategic partnership agreement in 2019, Mokopuna Ora has worked with over 715 mokopuna and their whaanau.[3]

Despite this renewed focus, the partnership still faced challenges. Irrespective of what was signed off on an organisation level, the readiness of Oranga Tamariki to genuinely collaborate with iwi was often questioned, and the anticipated outcomes of the strategic partnership agreement were not always realised. In 2021, however, a new phase of collaboration began with the development of a five-year investment proposal. This included a commitment by Oranga Tamariki to resource Waikato-Tainui Mokopuna Ora over five years, from 2022 to 2026. This proposal aimed to address the internal bureaucratic challenges and ensure the integrity of the proposed strategy. Support from Oranga Tamariki played a key role in navigating the agency's complex processes, and ensuring the proposal met the necessary requirements.

"I think it was refreshing to have someone (from Oranga Tamariki) that didn't try to manipulate where it was going. She allowed us to just be, this was ours. She was listening, this was our strategy, not Oranga Tamariki's."

"What we want to create is something that's totally different"

In its early inception, Mokopuna Ora only had two kaimahi. Given its resource limitations at that time, the focus was on Waikato iwi whaanau only. However, Mokopuna Ora expanded its operations in 2022 and now includes all whaanau Maaori in the area. Mokopuna Ora expanded into additional Oranga Tamariki sites (having initially been based in just one of several sites in the region). With this expansion, particularly into more urban areas, came a greater focus on the large number of whaanau in transitional housing. Mokopuna Ora now facilitates the provision of support to a larger number of whaanau, over a larger geographical area.

In 2023, Mokopuna Ora expanded from the Waikato Rural North Oranga Tamariki office into the two Oranga Tamariki Kirikiriroa City Offices, an expansion that Waikato-Tainui kaimahi saw as effective. It fostered strong leadership and mutual respect between Mokopuna Ora and Oranga Tamariki, with the mana and authority of iwi playing a crucial role for both whaanau and Mokopuna Ora kaimahi. The co-location of Mokopuna Ora within Oranga Tamariki offices facilitated smoother operations and mitigated tensions, with clear benefits seen in terms of whakawhanaungatanga and kanohi kitea resulting from co-location. However, the expansion was not without challenges, including a lack of clarity within Oranga Tamariki regarding the

[3] As at 30 June 2024.

scope of Mokopuna Ora's role. Cultural and practical differences also proved difficult at times, along with frustrations over delays in the consent processes and limited staff capacity at Oranga Tamariki. Sadly, some of these challenges have continued to grow in 2024 and 2025, as described further below.

In terms of how Mokopuna Ora works, the decision on how best to provide support is based on the level of need or criticality of support required, with priority given to mokopuna most at the risk of entering state care irrespective of their iwi. Their role is primarily in advocating for whaanau within the care and protection system; helping whaanau understand concerns and risks raised and how to navigate the Oranga Tamariki systems and processes; enable whaanau to create safe pathways for mokopuna; empower whaanau to find solutions for themselves; advise whaanau of their rights; provide non-judgmental, independent and safe space for whaanau; and connect whaanau to the right services primarily with kaupapa Maaori organisations in the community. Mokopuna Ora assign kaimahi to support whaanau throughout each stage of the process, working closely with them to address issues impacting mokopuna. Mokopuna Ora does not provide direct service provision. As they put it in a recent select committee submission, "it was not Waikato-Tainui's goal for Mokopuna Ora to become an arm of the Crown, undertaking its obligations for it."[4]

Every case handled by Mokopuna Ora requires whaanau consent before engagement. It is important for whaanau to opt for Mokopuna Ora to be their support and advocate, rather than have it imposed on them. Mokopuna Ora "walk alongside whaanau to ensure the safety of the mokopuna is paramount", supporting them in navigating care and protection processes. This includes attending court sessions, Family Group Conferences and formal Hui aa-Whaanau. Additionally, Mokopuna Ora advocates for whaanau at every point of decision making and ensures robust whaanau plans meet care and protection concerns.

In the long term, the team remains committed to preventing all mokopuna with Waikato iwi whakapapa from being uplifted into the Oranga Tamariki system, though this remains beyond their current capacities.

> *"We know that in order to successfully deliver on the overall strategy of Mokopuna Ora, and to do it well, we need to progressively stage it, or we won't achieve the systemic change we are striving for."*

The work that Mokopuna Ora does with Oranga Tamariki has grown over time, with significant effort put into socialising the kaupapa with Oranga Tamariki's two Kirikiriroa sites in 2022 and 2023. Mokopuna Ora is allocated to whaanau Maaori when a report of concern is received, and follows the whaanau through each statutory phase, ensuring consistency of support to whaanau when their social worker and/or site changes.

[4] Te Whakakitenga o Waikato Incorporated (2025). *Response to the Oranga Tamariki (Responding to Serious Youth Offending) Bill*.

This partnered practice has fostered continuous relationship-building with Oranga Tamariki. As one Oranga Tamariki site manager observed in a previous Mokopuna Ora Annual Report:[5]

> "Waikato Rural North have a longstanding relationship with Mokopuna Ora over a number of years now. Being able to offer this advocacy to whaanau that we work with (originally Waikato-Tainui whaanau only but now to all whaanau Maaori) has helped build whaanau mana motuhake and determine pathways for themselves in child protection space through the advocacy of Mokopuna Ora. We have seen the good work that both social workers and Mokopuna Ora create together. When this relationship works, we see a reduction in children coming into care and an ability to work with whaanau that Oranga Tamariki alone would not be able to."

A key challenge noted by a Mokopuna Ora kaimahi is the misconception among some Oranga Tamariki staff that Mokopuna Ora operates similarly to social workers, directly working with mokopuna rather than supporting whaanau. This misunderstanding created friction initially, and has required conscious efforts to redefine their role, emphasising their support for whaanau that enables the well-being of our mokopuna rather than direct child intervention. This friction has continued to be present, with resource constraints within Oranga Tamariki and the wider sector in 2024 and 2025 being a key contributor. Kaimahi also described a sense of Oranga Tamariki operating on different timeframes, with different sets of priorities.

"We have no intention of replicating what Oranga Tamariki does. What we want to create is something that's totally different. And that needs to be done in our own timeframes, not theirs"

Despite the progress, ongoing resource limitations restrict its ability to support whaanau from outside the current geographical areas of focus. As described below, some of these resourcing challenges continue to grow with recent shifts in government policy. When approached by those outside their geographical area, Mokopuna Ora strives to connect whaanau in other regions or countries with appropriate support services, but for now, the scope remains focused on the areas within Waikato as identified.

"Our accountability is to our people"

Mokopuna Ora's approach to practice is encapsulated in their Cultural Practice Framework Ki Tua o Ngaku Mokopuna, which is informed by their taonga tuku iho and underpinned by Ngaa Maataapono o Te Kiingitanga (the principles of the Kiingitanga). Ngaa maataapono o te Kiingitanga - manaakitanga, whakaiti, aroha, kotahitanga, whakapono, rangimaarie and mahi

[5] Mokopuna Ora End of Year Report 2022-2023.

tahi – are "woven into the fabric" of Mokopuna Ora, serving as the foundation from which everything flows. These principles underpin not only their team but also Waikato-Tainui as a whole. As one kaimahi put it, "it's the foundation upon which we are able to draw from that informs what we do." This applies not just to the work they do with whaanau, but the work they do with each other. One kaimahi described the process of going on a tira hoe on their waka with the rest of the Waikato-Tainui kaimahi, to learn more about their history and their tikanga, relate to the experiences of whaanau and grow together as a team. She described it as one of the personal highlights of her whole career.

Mokopuna Ora does not operate on a blanket view that all mokopuna are expected to remain in the care of their whakapapa whaanau. In rare cases where this is not in the best interests of the child, their vision is to ensure that mokopuna understand who they are and where they are from. Though iwi-centric in their own kaupapa, Mokopuna Ora describe their approach as "na te Maaori, moo te katoa (by Maaori, for everyone)", not just 'by Maaori, for Maaori'. This means that while their primary focus is on mokopuna Maaori, the principles and practices they developed have broader applicability and positive impact on non-Maaori as well. The intention is not to gatekeep their practices to Maaori children alone but to invite others to recognise and implement these practices in their own work with whaanau.

One of the primary successes of Mokopuna Ora is its ability to empower whaanau and enhance their mana motuhake. By enabling whaanau to navigate their own journeys and assert their voices, Mokopuna Ora has enabled many tamariki and mokopuna to remain safely in their wider whaanau instead of being uplifted into state care. From 2019 to 2024, Mokopuna Ora engaged with the families of 715 Maaori children in the Waikato region. Of these children, only six were placed in state care, and Mokopuna Ora continues to work with their whaanau to facilitate their return. An overwhelming majority of these cases had their care and protection concerns resolved through solutions informed by a whaanau-led process. These remain the goals for Waikato-Tainui, and these statistics suggest that the Mokopuna Ora model has been successful in reconnecting whaanau who would otherwise enter the state care and protection system.

There have also been successes in terms of engagement. Waikato-Tainui engages with their people through multiple avenues, including hui-aa-tau, sports events, poukai and a strong online presence. These forms of engagement place the iwi in a unique position to amplify the voices of their people, ensuring that those most affected by the work play a key role in shaping it. It is important for Mokopuna Ora to remain closely connected and engaged in their community, as that is where their primary accountability lies.

> *"Our accountability is to our people first and foremost. While we honour our contractual arrangements with the Crown, that's in the distance. Our accountability is to our people."*

"The biggest voice should be our whaanau"

The strategy behind these successes is threefold, focusing on both immediate support and long-term systemic change. The first aspect is frontline advocacy, with the team advocating for

whaanau within the care and protection system, helping them navigate challenges and access resources. The second aspect is top-down systemic change. Mokopuna Ora (and Waikato-Tainui broadly) aims to amplify the voice of their whaanau by advocating at a strategic level in the care and protection sector, and in Crown spaces broadly.

"The tribe sits at tables that our community and our whaanau don't. So that's around legislative change, crown partnerships, around how we amplify the voice of our whaanau in terms of where they see challenges. Resourcing, policies, procedures, services and systems that are fit for purpose for whaanau."

But that advocacy is not limited to top-down approaches. The third aspect of their strategic approach is far more 'bottom-up', centered around enabling whaanau to have the largest voice in shaping the design of the care and protection system. This remains a key priority for Waikato-Tainui, and aligns with 'Te Ara Whakatupuranga 2050', the iwi's long term strategic plan.

"The biggest voice should be our whaanau, our haapori. Specialists and different other levels of expertise around the country need to help inform it but the biggest voice needs to be whaanau, they are the ones most affected."

The presence and advocacy of key supports has also been a factor behind these successes. Mokopuna Ora kaimahi named Judge Tania Williams-Blyth as particularly central to much of the achievements they described, who (prior to becoming a Judge) was a key contributor to the work since early on in its inception. According to those kaimahi, Judge Williams-Blyth contributed to the original intent and design for Mokopuna Ora, conducted multiple technical training sessions, and generously offered her time to provide guidance on complex cases. Challenging the status quo and keeping whaanau and tamariki front and center were central to these efforts, while always ensuring that the work was grounded in iwi perspectives. The need for this has grown over the past year.

"We never gave up the right to care for our children, our whakapapa. So it's important for us that we are here."

"The Crown is not the right vehicle to interpret tikanga"

Despite its successes, Mokopuna Ora continues to face challenges, and sadly many of these have grown over the past year. One of those relates to a growing misalignment with Oranga Tamariki and the Crown broadly. Mokopuna Ora believes there needs to be more facilitated processes to devolve services to the community. Kaimahi shared a concern that Oranga Tamariki's approach to devolution – which often involves transferring responsibility and resources within rigid timeframes – risks creating a "cookie-cutter" model that does not meet the diverse needs of Maaori. One kaimahi said, "we think that the ones that will pay for that will

be whaanau, because not all communities are the same." Mokopuna Ora advocates for a more tailored and responsive approach, emphasising that communities are not one-size-fits-all and that resources should be allocated based on specific local needs.

> *"The system is broken. Full of half-pai promises. We know we have answers and solutions. We did it with Covid once the government stopped trying to control everything. We have always known Mana Motuhake works."*[6]

Other challenges relate to whether Oranga Tamariki actually remains committed to devolution, as well as other systemic and legislative barriers. Kaimahi for Mokopuna Ora said they still encounter difficulties with how others interpret and apply the Oranga Tamariki Act. Although the Act is in many ways intended to reflect tikanga Maaori, it has often been implemented in ways that do not align with these principles. The Act and the framework that it utilises can sometimes get manipulated. This remains an ongoing risk of incorporating tikanga into legislation.

> *"We've seen Oranga Tamariki bastardise and butcher the Act in terms of its intent... the Crown is not the right vehicle to interpret tikanga, or apply it."*

Partly in recognition of these challenges, Waikato-Tainui have been active in their advocacy for law and policy reform. Shifts in law and policy have created significant concern since the change in government in late 2023, both in relation to care and protection specifically, and in relation to iwi Maaori more broadly.

Importantly, this advocacy in Crown spaces is not just reactive, it also includes (for example) ongoing advocacy for community panels, a proposed reimagining of the family court whereby a three-person panel consisting of a legally trained person, an iwi representative and a community representative would make decisions about the care of children, instead of this being done solely by a judge. Waikato-Tainui see this is an important step in restoring community trust in the Family Court, given that many people (of all ethnicities) currently find the Court alienating, inaccessible and disconnected. Moreover, the Family Court is seen as often failing to adequately fulfil its independent role in scrutinising care applications made by child protection agencies. Instead, the Court is said to "rubber stamp" care applications.

Particularly in light of findings of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, Waikato-Tainui has stressed the need for a "fundamental change in Family Court care and protection decision-making" to reduce the persistent over-representation of tamariki Maaori in state care. This comes from a belief that "from a decision-making perspective, understanding the place of a child in te ao Maaori is critical to addressing structural bias and achieving better outcomes for tamariki Maaori." Community Panels would speak to mana motuhake and partnership between iwi and the Crown, ensuring Maaori are actively involved in decision-making processes.

[6] Quote from Naa Kiingi Tuheitia Pootatau Te Wherowhero VII: Mokopuna Ora Annual Report 2023-24 at 21.

Mokopuna Ora have pushed for legislation that supports this initiative, have made submissions to Parliament to this effect and have called on the Prime Minister to effect change.

"Devolution is not the same as decentralisation"

As summarised in a recent report, "responding to Crown Policy and Law Reform continues to be a priority for Waikato-Tainui."[7] Among the concerns relating to Mokopuna Ora are an apparent change in language from Oranga Tamariki officials from 'devolution' of the agency's functions, to 'decentralisation' of those functions. As the iwi have stated, "this change in approach directly contradicts the strategy for Mokopuna Ora."[8] As for the difference between the two concepts, the perspective of Waikato-Tainui is that "devolution is deeper, and involves the transfer of power, whereas decentralisation is more administrative and keeps oversight with Oranga Tamariki."[9] These statements echo previous comments, discussed above, that the relationship between the Crown and Waikato-Tainui is not one of service provision, but one of a Treaty partnership. The iwi has had to reinforce this with the Crown many times in the past year.[10]

Sadly, over the past year the iwi has needed to raise significant concerns with Oranga Tamariki directly. Well-publicised government funding cuts[11] as well as other policy changes have led to what Mokopuna Ora see as major impediments to the success of the work that has been happening over the past five years. Among the concerns are the fact that demand for Oranga Tamariki services is growing just as the capacity of the agency is shrinking, and as a result there are increasing requests for help from Mokopuna Ora which fall outside the terms of their strategic partnership agreement. From Waikato-Tainui's perspective, the experiences of tamariki and whaanau are being negatively affected by capacity challenges within Oranga Tamariki, as well as cuts to funding and services outside of Oranga Tamariki, which have just as much of an impact on the whaanau that Mokopuna Ora was set up to support.

Waikato-Tainui stress that relationships with their Oranga Tamariki colleagues at a local level remain strong, and in many cases they have expressed aroha for those colleagues who themselves have been placed under huge pressure over the last year. But at the organisational and political levels there remains concern about the partnership as a whole.

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[7] Waikato-Tainui (2024). *Waikato-Tainui Quarterly Report 2024/2025 – 1 July to 30 September 2024*. At 26
[8] Waikato-Tainui (2024) at 27.
[9] Waikato-Tainui (2024) at 27.
[10] See, for example: Te Whakakitenga o Waikato Incorporated (2025). *Response to the Oranga Tamariki (Responding to Serious Youth Offending) Bill*.
[11] See, for example: Te Pai Ora Social Sectors Providers Association. (2024). *Community-based Social Services on Edge: Funding Cuts Threaten Children*. Te Pai Ora SSPA Press Release, 8 August 2024. <https://www.sspa.org.nz/news/article/community-based-social-services-on-edge-funding-cuts-threaten-children>

Ngaa Maataapono o te Kiingitanga underpins Tainuitanga and Waikatotanga. It's who we are.

Waikato-Tainui Mokopuna Ora don't use the term decolonisation to describe what they do. Kaimahi spoke about how this term carries a sense of deficit. Instead, they embrace the kupu 'mana motuhake' as a more strength-based term that resonates with their aspirations. That focus on mana motuhake remains strong despite recent challenges in the relationship with Oranga Tamariki. In a recent select committee submission, representatives of Waikato-Tainui stated the following, in regards to the challenges and successes of that relationship:[12]

> *"Our experience has shown that when there is recognition of an approach based on the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and the importance of mana tamaiti (tamariki), whakapapa and whanaungatanga... the relationship between Iwi/Maaori and the Crown works for the benefit of whaanau and tamariki."*

Naturally, they also draw heavily from Ngaa maataapono o te Kiingitanga:

> *"There are fundamental principles in terms of ngaa maataapono o te Kiingitanga that our practice is underpinned by, our approach is underpinned by, our wider strategy in terms of a different care and protection system is underpinned by."*

Despite recent challenges, this vision remains in place. The goal for Mokopuna Ora remains to transform the current system and reduce the number of Waikato Iwi mokopuna entering and remaining in state care. Ngaa maataapono o te Kiingitanga remains central to that vision, reminding kaimahi of the longevity of this kaupapa more broadly.

> *"These principles aren't new. They don't change every three years when someone gets a different idea or framework. It's not just used by our team, it underpins Tainuitanga and Waikatotanga. It's who we are."*

[12] Te Whakakitenga o Waikato Incorporated (2025). *Response to the Oranga Tamariki (Responding to Serious Youth Offending) Bill.* At 6.

Case Study Two – Te Tohu o Te Ora o Ngāti Awa

"We've always been able to do what we do, the legislation just gave government the ability to recognise us"

The whakapapa of Te Tohu o Te Ora o Ngāti Awa lies in the late 1980s, around the time of Pūao Te Ata Tū.[13] 1989 was a pivotal year that saw the introduction of the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act following the publication of that report a few years earlier. John Rangihau and the others who wrote that report envisioned a future where tamariki Māori would be returned from state care to their iwi, whānau, and hapū. Rangihau wrote to the government at that time to say that Māori were ready to take our tamariki back. Many of the voices heard as part of the extensive engagement conducted when Pūao Te Ata Tū was written were from Ngāti Awa, and the iwi was ready to pick up the tono and the call to action.

The iwi quickly established itself as an early adopter of the mātua whāngai kaupapa, demonstrating a commitment to return Māori children to their communities. This commitment was formalised under the rūnanga at the time, under the leadership of Sir Hirini Moko Mead and Jo Mason. These kaumatua and others, rooted deeply in the values and aspirations of their people, became the inaugural trustees of what is now known as Te Tohu o Te Ora o Ngāti Awa. The early days were very small – two staff, one car, one computer and six beds in a home which Housing New Zealand no longer wanted.

The early 1990s marked a significant period of growth, as the organisation expanded their range of community services. Initially centered around mātua whāngai, the organisation grew into broader community and social services, including hauora-focused services like mobile vaccination services. These services were all child-focused and led Ngāti Awa to the whānau focused organisation that they are today.

"Our origins in that mātua whāngai programme, that whakapapa, have led to our strengths today in that care space."

Despite this, the full realisation of Rangihau's vision has remained elusive. The initial aspirations outlined in Puao Te Ata Tu were only partially reflected in the subsequent legislation. While some progress was made, the systemic change required to fully empower Māori to care for their own tamariki has been stunted. The fact that, over 30 years later, the same challenges are being faced highlights the persistent gap between policy and practice. As the CEO explained:

[13] https://www.tetohuoteora.org.nz/about

"I recall John Rangihau in his letter as part of the Royal Commission said that Māori were ready to take their tamariki back. And here we are, 30 something odd years later and we are still singing the same waiata."

Some of the struggles of Te Tohu o Te Ora o Ngāti Awa reflect this reality. The Crown's requirements have often been in tension with the vision of an iwi-driven system that fully aligns with traditional Māori structures of whānau, iwi, and hapū. This is a continuous journey, which has often been frustrating:

"We have been banging our head against brick walls for the Crown to allow us to be us."

Today, their services include multiple residential homes providing both emergency and long-term care for tamariki. As a whole, the organisation employs over 135 staff members, which gives it the operational capacity to be prepared for any opportunities that may arise. But it was those early days of Pūao Te Ata Tū and the new legislation in the late 1980s which really set things in motion.

"I often say that the whakapapa of the organisation came from legislation. That is how it came through. We have always, as an organisation, fully understood that our whakapapa and kaupapa came as a result of that legislation."

That said, it is important to recognise that when the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act was passed in 1989, it didn't create an iwi-led care system from scratch, it merely provided better recognition (as well as resources) to a system which already existed. "We've always been able to do what we do," it was explained, "the legislation just gave government the ability to recognise us."

Initially, the mātua whāngai programme operated under the umbrella of the rūnanga, integrated within its structure to serve as a key provider of social services to the iwi. Nowadays, the organisation operates as a trust at arm's length from the rūnanga (a consequence of the Treaty Settlement process). This autonomy allows it to focus on delivering services that directly benefit the iwi without being encumbered by the day-to-day operational and commercial concerns of the rūnanga. Regular reporting mechanisms ensure ongoing alignment and accountability between the trust and the rūnanga, but the trust's focus is squarely on service delivery, acting as the mandated iwi provider for a wide range of social and cultural services.

"Moving from Te Po into Te Ao"

Ngāti Awa's current strategy is centered around lifting whānau out of poverty, a root cause of many of the issues facing tamariki Māori today. By focusing on building resilient, safe, and

supportive home environments, they aim to reduce the number of children entering state care and breaking the cycle of negative statistics that affect both tamariki and their whānau. This draws directly on some of the vision from Pūao Te Ata Tū:

> *"The vision of John Rangihau was to take our tamariki out of state care, which is all about moving from Te Po into Te Ao. If we can do that, we will shift the dial on poverty. Poverty is underpinning tamariki being taken into the care system."*

A key current focus of the organisation is Te Pūkāea, a prototype initiative aimed at creating new models of support and care for tamariki and their families. Te Pūkāea is community waharoa (gateway) comprised of a call centre and trained staff able to respond to the needs of tamariki and whānau who would otherwise come to the attention of Oranga Tamariki. Calls made to Oranga Tamariki within the Eastern Bay of Plenty area, including reports of concern, are now forwarded directly to Te Pūkāea for Te Tohu o Te Ora to manage. They work collaboratively with Oranga Tamariki when required, with navigators supporting whānau either in their interactions with the agency, or, ideally, outside of that entirely. The initiative means that some whānau who would otherwise come to the attention of the state are able to be supported entirely by the iwi. Te Pūkāea is seen as just one part of a bigger system change, representing a key part of Ngāti Awa's commitment to driving meaningful change in their community.

A key lesson from the journey that Ngāti Awa has been on with respect to this mahi has been the importance of being prepared for the right opportunities. The organisation's growth has been characterised by strategic planning and capacity-building, ensuring they are ready to act when new opportunities for devolution arise. This isn't always easy, and often requires the tenacity to challenge the assumptions of the state. But expanding their capacity to enable them to effectively partner with agencies like Oranga Tamariki in ways that align with their kaupapa has been a key enabler. When the opportunity arose for 7AA to prototype an idea, they were ready.

> *"Strength of leadership and tenacity… you have to have strength to work the system. You have to be able to manoeuvre the system."*

"We know that there is a better way to do things"

Ngāti Awa's strategic partnership with Oranga Tamariki is facilitated through the Eastern Bay of Plenty Iwi Provider Alliance.[14] This alliance includes several iwi from the region and serves as a collective platform for engaging with government agencies. Each iwi retains its individual autonomy and can operate independently under its own mana.

Ngāti Awa utilises two primary channels for engagement with Oranga Tamariki. The first channel operates through the Eastern Bay of Plenty Iwi Provider Alliance, which focuses on the

[14] https://www.ebopiwipa.org.nz/

operational aspects of service delivery. This is where the "doing" happens—the ground-level implementation of programmes and initiatives. The second channel is the direct iwi-to-state relationship, where Ngāti Awa engages as an independent entity through its rūnanga. This pathway tends to be reserved for higher-level major issues, enabling the right balance of on-the-ground service delivery conversations and higher-level strategic conversations.

This provides Te Tohu o Te Ora with the flexibility to navigate both collaborative and independent strategies without confusion. The rūnanga handles overarching treaty relationships, while the provider alliance focuses on delivery and implementation. As the CEO emphasised, "when I talk to Oranga Tamariki at the highest levels we always talk Ngāti Awa… there is no grey for us." This clarity in roles and responsibilities ensures that Ngāti Awa can assert its rangatiratanga while effectively collaborating with other iwi and government entities.

> *"As Māori, we all share the same vision for our whānau… if you share the same vision it's not about control or power, it's not about fiefdom… it's about keeping the kaupapa pure."*

One of the strengths of this approach is the shared vision among the iwi and the alliance partners. The success of the partnership hinges on a collective commitment to the kaupapa—ensuring the wellbeing of their tamariki. When everyone prioritises the shared kaupapa over individual interests, it becomes easier to navigate complex issues and maintain unity. As it was explained, "if you can keep the kaupapa pure, which is about our babies… you are not going to get an argument from anybody." Much of this work is also about building the capacity to 'weather the storm' and see through the ongoing changes that might come from the government of the day. There is a longer-term vision at play that extends beyond any given government.

"We already knew who we were – 7AA is for the Crown"

For Ngāti Awa, the strategic partnership with Oranga Tamariki was not an essential requirement for their operations. As an established 396 provider, they already possessed the mechanisms needed to deliver services independently. From their perspective, the strategic partnership was primarily beneficial for Oranga Tamariki, providing clarity and structure on how to engage with iwi providers. This clarity empowered Oranga Tamariki staff to understand their roles better and to facilitate the flow of resources.

> *"The relationship with the strategic partnership, or prior to, already existed because we were already contracting since 1989. But what I noticed between pre-partnership and post-partnership was the clarity that 7AA and the resulting strategic partnership gave to Oranga Tamariki staff."*

In some ways the partnership was seen as a means to an end – initiating a new phase of the organisational relationship (and the resources that came with that), but not 'necessary' in and of itself. The strategic partnership was useful for Oranga Tamariki staff to understand who they were dealing with and what their vision was, and justify resource allocation accordingly. Te Tohu o Te Ora created a document which detailed their rohe, values and who they are, but this was for the benefit of the State. As the CEO stated:

> *"We already knew who we were, 7AA is for the Crown… But government systems have to have all of these tick boxes, and the strategic partnership was one of them."*

The partnership allowed the local Oranga Tamariki office to have the ability to develop strategic plans of their own. The local site, and the staff that worked there, was a key enabler as there were strong pre-existing relationships here, formed through the long-standing work of Te Tohu o Te Ora as a section 396 provider. This allowed for more collaborative approaches to working together, fostering a deeper level of trust.

At a regional level, this also meant the contracting for the Te Pūkāea prototype was easier. Therefore, one of the key factors that contributes to the success of the partnership was the alignment of priorities and openness among all levels of Oranga Tamariki – national, regional, and local – to work together on a unified strategy for the Eastern Bay. The 7AA strategic partnership primarily served to streamline processes within Oranga Tamariki, rather than fundamentally altering how Ngāti Awa operated.

"Moving mountains is something that we are quite used to"

A key success factor of Ngāti Awa's approach to child welfare has been the prominent role of wahine Māori leadership. The care and protection of children has historically and continues to be led by wāhine Māori, who bring a unique strength and perspective to this work.

> *"The care and children space has always been led by wāhine Māori… advocating strongly and moving mountains is something that we are quite used to."*

This leadership is inherently linked to tikanga and the way Māori function as a collective. The advocacy of wāhine Māori is driven by a powerful sense of responsibility and special connection to mokopuna, a bond that is both personal and cultural.

> *"The connection between our mokopuna and a māmā and being a wāhine being the lead is something that is quite intrinsic that we are naturally born to do. The consistency of that*

thread of having our babies, our pēpi, from the kākano is the bond that you're going to see, that consistency and bond and connection."

Another success factor for Te Tohu o Te Ora is having tenacity and a long-term vision. For Ngāti Awa, success in child welfare has not been an overnight achievement. Rather, it has been the result of deliberate and strategic long-term planning that spans across local, regional and national levels. Sometimes collaboration has been more straight-forward at a local and regional level, with progress at a national level proving more challenging. It has at times felt like there has been a disconnect between national office and local communities, with national office not always aware of what is happening on the ground.

In order to achieve this, Oranga Tamariki may need to decentralise its functions to the local level. This decentralisation, it was argued, would eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles and facilitate a more direct understanding of community needs. There is sometimes a particular challenge of Ngāti Awa being a 'medium sized' iwi, which feels as though they are sometimes seen by Oranga Tamariki as a lesser strategic priority than other, larger, iwi.

"We should just be using kōrero like 'give our children back'"

We discussed whether the term "by Māori, for Māori" is the best fit in the current political climate, where the phrase can be easily misunderstood or weaponised. Accusations of separatism or unfairness can create additional barriers for Māori who are just trying to get on with reclaiming their rights over child welfare. There is also the risk whereby government agencies adopt "by Māori, for Māori" terminology in superficial ways. By adding Māori names and concepts to their programs and employing a few Māori staff members, these agencies present themselves as culturally sensitive and aligned with Māori values. But by and large these are still fundamentally Pākehā systems.

The CEO drew parallels with the term "whanau ora", explaining how it started as a Māori concept but was co-opted by governments into a commissioning concept, which emphasised funding. We discussed the possible need to move beyond the term "by Māori, for Māori", which originated in the kōhanga reo movement, to a model rooted in returning Māori children to their whānau, hapū, and iwi:

"When we are talking about our mokopuna, it gets back to what is intrinsically ours. We do not actually have to denote or determine the "for Māori, by Māori", we should just be using kōrero like 'give our children back'. Our mokopuna need to be with their whānau, their hapū, their iwi, because that's their whakapapa."

One of the issues with "by Māori, for Māori" is that it is too general; it can apply to anyone. Instead of focusing on a vague concept that could apply to any Māori group or individual, Te Tohu o Te Ora frames it in a more specific way. For them, the priority is to ensure that their

tamariki are returned to their whenua, their whānau, their hapū and iwi. This calls for returning children to whakapapa and whenua, regardless of the logistical challenges that may arise. This narrative - one that prioritises the return of children to their whānau, hapu and iwi, cannot be easily misused or misconstrued.

"If you have taken a mokopuna from Tāmaki Makaurau and you cannot find a place for them with their immediate whānau, then they should be returned."

Similarly, the term decolonisation does not always resonate, though it can at times. It was reflected that decolonisation means decolonising ourselves, as Māori, from the Pākehā worldview. This process involves learning or relearning parts of ourselves, or finding parts of ourselves that need to be rediscovered.

"It just means that for us who do not speak Māori, learn. For us, who do not know our whakapapa, go and find it. For us who are disconnected from our roots, get home and reconnect yourself."

In the child protection context, decolonisation is less about discussing the theories and more about "doing the work". When working with whānau, Te Tohu o Te Ora don't typically use the term decolonisation. Instead, they focus on the current situation and building resilience within whānau, and the first step in building that resilience is helping people understand who they are and where they come from. They also do this through pūrākau and tūpuna narratives.

"If you know who you are, you are able to stand on your whenua. Ko wai au? I am with this whenua; I can stand tall. That is the very first thing we do - build them up."

Decolonisation is therefore a return to cultural roots and values that form the foundation of a child's identity and well-being. This must be accessible and understandable to whānau.

"I totally respect the theory behind decolonising methodologies, but in a practitioner's world, we actually have to get back to the real fundamental basics and their two different worlds. Theory is so different to the practice."

"Getting everybody over the line"

The long-term vision for Te Tohu o Te Ora is to reduce the "pipeline" of tamariki into the care and protection system. When tamariki enter the Oranga Tamariki system at a young age, they are often caught in a trajectory that can lead to a lifetime of interactions with the state welfare and

justice systems. Therefore the objective is two-fold; reducing the number of tamariki entering the system, and building a new system that avoids the need for it in the first place.

There is a strong focus on sharing what Te Tohu o Te Ora have learnt with other iwi and across te ao Māori, enabling other iwi to benefit from Ngāti Awa's blueprint and collectively reduce the presence of tamariki in the state system. A tangible example of this is a symposium held to connect a range of iwi-led pilot programmes currently working with government, so that all of them have the best chance of success. This is a deeply connected endeavour.

> *"We have not only worked for ourselves, we have worked for the wider good of our Māori iwi across the country or across the motu. And the only way we can do that is by sharing, showing leadership and getting everybody over the line."*

Key to this is collaboration, as this is more significant than any single iwi, and it requires a unified Māori approach across the motu. It was emphasised that "we have to start working as waka and we have got to start all riding in the same direction."

There have been difficulties faced by Ngāti Awa and other iwi as they attempt to implement these initiatives within a system heavily influenced by government control. Collaboration is hindered by limited resources, which are often allocated through government pilot programmes. This can create an inherently competitive environment where iwi must bid for resources, effectively making them "play the Crown's game."

> *"It's an unfair system from the get-go because they're busy controlling how it's going to work. We will forever be at the whim of the way government behaves because they have control of the resources."*

As for the future, Ngāti Awa envisions a future in which the government plays a far more limited role in child welfare, specifically focusing on statutory protections rather than day-to-day involvement in family matters. While the government may still need to intervene in the most severe situations, the broader responsibility for child welfare should rest with the iwi and whānau. Much of the trauma Māori face today stems from government-led abuses, such as those documented in historical care reports, and iwi are now left to address the consequences of these policies. This is part of larger systemic issues and the enduring influence of colonisation, which continues to shape the power dynamics between the Crown and iwi. The long-term, structural changes that Ngāti Awa envisage in the child protection context are part of overcoming these long-term issues.

Case Study Three – Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services

"It was never just about social services"

In Ngāpuhi, as is the case across the motu, whānau, hapū and iwi have worked together for generations to protect, guide, speak up for and care for tamariki, rangatahi and mokopuna. Hapū and iwi-based efforts to improve the wellbeing of their people have always existed, and that was the foundation, not legislation or policy, when Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services (NISS) was established in the 1980s.[15] Kaumatua and kuia had begun coming together to discuss the concern about the growing number of Ngāpuhi mokopuna being placed in state care, often in institutions, or with unrelated strangers. This was a period marked by significant political changes, including the hīkoi led by Dame Whina Cooper, wider Māori social movements, and demographic changes, like the ongoing urban migrations of Māori towards towns and cities. In the area of social services this included the publication of Pūao Te Ata Tū and a new emphasis on devolution of services to communities, including iwi.

"Our people had already established that they were being treated poorly, and that how the Crown was responding was not in line with a Ngāpuhi worldview. Pūao Te Ata Tū reinforced and supported those existing views held by our people."

This wider backdrop of Māori social change affected iwi across Aotearoa, but had particular implications for Ngāpuhi. Although NISS was not formally established until later, its foundations were laid during this period, beginning with the establishment of mātua whāngai in 1986. Te Runanga-Ā-Iwi-Ō-Ngāpuhi helped to support and administer the kaupapa, but marae, hapū and iwi carried out the work 'on the ground'. The work was spurred by the view that government policies were failing Māori, and that Ngāpuhi should be caring for their own.

"There was no NISS office, no NISS board, no NISS staff. Just people from the hapū with the huge desire and love for mokopuna."

Whānau opened their homes, supported other whānau, cared for tamariki and did everything they could to ensure that mokopuna remained connected to their whakapapa and identity. When mokopuna were from other hapū or didn't know where they were from, kaumatua and kuia would soon be able to identify their whakapapa connections through their parents and grandparents. In contrast to today's practices, which are usually more formalised, mokopuna in need of care would simply be cared for directly by those whānau, until contact could be made with their own whānau and hapū. Practices were driven by whakapapa and whanaungatanga, and the mutual commitments to one another that those things created.

[15] https://www.niss.org.nz/about

"There were really clear and influential voices saying that this was not the way our mokopuna should be looked after – they should be being placed with hapū and iwi."

The establishment of NISS was therefore deeply rooted in a commitment to whakapapa, and in the wider changes affecting Ngāpuhi communities. Kaumatua and kuia had lengthy discussions at the time about these kaupapa, including the effects of widespread migration from rural areas to urban centres, and NISS was born out of these early conversations. For those involved, as one person put it, "it was just never about social services," it was simply an attempt to bring people together to address issues collectively.

"It was whānau and hapū taking responsibility for their own."

A pivotal development during this time was the mātua whāngai programme. This involved providing funding to iwi to care for their children who were in the custody of the state, while keeping them connected to whānau. From the perspective of NISS, the purpose was twofold: to identify these children, and to provide a koha to the whānau who chose to care for them. However, the implementation of mātua whāngai was not without challenges. The resourcing provided was never seen as sufficient, and many of the tamariki placed under this programme did not have a clear whakapapa connection to the whānau they were placed with. Despite this, the elders involved used their extensive knowledge of whakapapa to ensure that tamariki were placed in appropriate care. They would often informally discuss and arrange placements, ensuring that children were returned to their rightful hapū if they were initially placed elsewhere.

Mātua whāngai also sparked discussions within the marae about the broader responsibilities of Ngāpuhi. Hapū leaders recognised that their role extended beyond just caring for the children; they also needed to maintain and strengthen the connections within their whānau, including those living in urban areas like Tāmaki. Mātua whāngai offices extended across Ngāpuhi rohe, and were managed collectively by hapū and marae. This early work laid the groundwork for the subsequent establishment of NISS.

"We did not need the government to define us as an iwi"

In 1992, the government offered Ngāpuhi their first social services contract. This was robustly debated, with many questioning whether the funding reflected the size, responsibility and needs of Ngāpuhi. Hapū came together for two days of wānanga to decide on the most effective way to utilise the funds in the best interests of their mokopuna and whānau. That decision-making process was deeply rooted in their ethos: that mokopuna must remain protected inside their whānau and whakapapa, never separated or seen as exclusive people outside of it.

The name "Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services" was not universally supported at that time. The contract came with a name that had not been agreed to, and some kaumatua and kuia did not want to include the terms "iwi" or "social services". Their vision focused on whānau and hapū

taking responsibility for their own, and by emphasising 'iwi' and 'services' the name caused discontent among some of those who were involved. There was also scepticism about what the government might want in return, and doubts over their true intent.

> *"Ngāpuhi already knew who we were, we did not need the Government to define us as an iwi. We also did not see caring for our own as a social service. It was simply the role and responsibility of Ngāpuhi to whakapapa."*

Describing those wānanga, one current kaimahi of NISS reflected that what the elders were really talking about was equity and equality, particularly in relation to their own tangata and their own mana motuhake. The laying down of a relatively small contract for the whole of Ngāpuhi was seen as a breach not only against their mana, but also the expectation that the government and iwi were supposed to be working together. She said, "from my own perspective and my hapū's stance, I don't think there is a partnership." A major concern was that Ngāpuhi was being named, defined, and categorised through a government contract, within a rushed timeframe. Naming was seen as important - names carry mana, identity, and authority, and the name deserved careful consideration. Despite these concerns, the kaupapa remained unchanged.

As these contracts started to become more common, procedures and processes needed to be implemented. It was common at the time for different hapū leaders to gather and discuss different kaupapa relating to social services, and to give support to each other when these kaupapa were brought to the table. However, the increase in government contracts was sometimes in tension with this approach, as it brought with it a more siloed approach to service delivery. There were contracts available in different portfolios such as justice, education, and the environment which began to operate independently, each driven by the specific requirements and expectations of different government departments.

> *"Contracts started to come in, and there was a whole development around developing policies and procedures. We were given a short period of time to actually develop that, and… what had to happen was everything that they did not want to happen. So everything was imposed on them as opposed to developing."*

The wairua of the services sometimes began to shift, as contracts influenced the thinking of those involved in service delivery. One kaimahi recalled, "contracts were then driving our thought processes." Fewer decisions were made solely based on what was in the best interest of hapū. Instead, the focus shifted to meeting the requirements of the contracts and ensuring that they could "fit the criteria". As one kaimahi said "the whakapapa-based way of solving our own problems started to get more and more systemised."

In some ways this is seen as one of the ongoing impacts that colonisation has had on their operational practices. The initial contracts with external agencies often led to a shift towards bureaucratic procedures that conflicted with traditional practices. This shift forced Ngāpuhi to operate in a "siloed" manner, driven by the need to comply with administrative requirements

and “tick all the boxes”. The imposition of these frameworks by the Crown, and the administrative requirements that came along with them, affected the way Ngāpuhi operated.

“The knowledge base has been dominated by Western knowledge”

In 1989, the legislative landscape shifted significantly, with expanded efforts to incorporate Māori perspectives and practices into child protection services and practices. As one kaimahi described it, these were genuine attempts, but the changes still often remained underpinned by Western knowledge systems. The integration of mātauranga Māori into state law was fraught with challenges. Western-centric approaches within legislation often overshadowed, and continue to overshadow, Māori perspectives. This remains a challenge for Ngāpuhi as they are working to reclaim mātauranga Māori, and more specifically mātauranga-ā-Ngāpuhi, but face challenges due to the philosophical and conceptual clashes between these traditional understandings and Western legal frameworks.

Kaimahi described how kupu Māori in legislation are often misused. One gave the example that although te reo Māori terms such as whānau are incorporated into legislation, their meanings are often oversimplified. That word “whānau”, for example, means more than just family; it embodies a deeper, more nuanced concept that is not fully captured by its legislative use. Those challenges have been present since kupu Māori and tikanga Māori were first introduced into the law in 1989, and this remains true today.

> *“We are trying to reclaim mātauranga Māori or mātauranga o Ngāpuhi, even more specifically for us, and were dominated by that sort of clash. You know, we try and make it work, but philosophically and conceptually it competes against each other.”*

“It’s not the model, it’s the system that it sits within”

Kaimahi spoke about several challenges when it came to partnering with the state to deliver child protection services, including misalignment of values and priorities, cultural misunderstandings and operational inefficiencies, the challenge of embedding kaupapa Māori models within a Crown framework, insufficient resources, and the time-consuming nature of engaging with the Crown.

Despite the success of the kaupapa Māori models practiced by organisations such as NISS, sometimes in partnership with the Crown, these issues persist. One kaimahi noted that while kaupapa Māori homes within Oranga Tamariki have shown effective outcomes, they often face friction because they operate within a broader Crown system which is not grounded in kaupapa Māori, which can undermine their effectiveness. Kaupapa Māori models do “not work within a Crown system”, and can often face the brunt of the blame if things ever go wrong:

"When there are things that have gone wrong it was the kaupapa Māori model that has been challenged. But it's not the model, it's the system that it sits within."

Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services has faced significant challenges in its quest to provide effective support to its community. Kaimahi described the frustration of having to rely on Crown funding, noting that it perpetuates a system that often fails to address the unique needs of Māori communities effectively. This reliance on the Crown's resources limits the iwi's ability to fully realise its potential and assert its self-determination. There was a need described for Ngāpuhi to find ways to become more self-sufficient and less reliance on external funding sources, especially Crown sources. One kaimahi remarked that "a big part of it is trying to find that self-sustainability, so that we can make our own decisions moving forward". She described this as a 'paradigm shift' which was necessary for organisations like NISS to succeed.

Another NISS kaimahi described the exhausting nature of working with the Crown. Despite the potential benefits for the community, the process of engaging with the Crown can be draining. This included the time and energy required to work in the ways that Crown wanted them to, such as writing proposals in particular ways.

"We spend maybe 3 to 5 days putting huge amounts of effort, you know, me putting 4 or 5 people on this proposal, which gets looked at and then gets put back. They have no concept about how much work it takes, and how much of our resource we have to use to get something to that point."

This experience highlights a profound power imbalance. The Crown's perception is that they are being consultative and sharing power, but kaimahi described how Crown workers often lack awareness of how their actions reinforce control and power, and how this could lead to frustration and disillusionment.

"Whakapapa is forever"

Kaimahi also spoke about the strengths of NISS and their approach, including an emphasis on whakapapa, a deep sense of accountability to iwi, and the ability to draw on different bodies of knowledge strategically to serve the people they work with.

One of the strengths of NISS is that whakapapa acts as the foundation in all aspects of their practice. One speaker noted that the strength of their model lies in its reliance on whakapapa, suggesting that having individuals who whakapapa to the whānau they support adds a profound depth of accountability and responsibility. This approach contrasts sharply with perspectives which might see such connections as a conflict of interest. For NISS, these connections are a cornerstone, providing a more culturally grounded form of support. Whakapapa forms the foundation of all practices, representing "what a Ngāpuhi child welfare system would look like if

we were able to build that vision and not have to fit in the constraints of contracting." As one kaimahi put it, whakapapa is forever.

One impact of this approach is the depth of connection and relationship their youth workers have with the tamariki and rangatahi they work with. As one kaimahi explained, their youth workers "think of them like nieces, nephews, brothers… they do whakapapa to us so they have a strength of relationship." This connection is built on a shared whakapapa, which means kaimahi feel a deep sense of obligation and accountability towards the tamariki they support. Local accountability within NISS is deeply rooted. One speaker spoke about how kaimahi are not only accountable to funders, but also their own whānau, hapū and takiwā.

> *"You're accountable to yourself because you carry more than just that on your shoulders. You carry the responsibility that you put on yourself to make sure you do well by your own."*

Another kaimahi explained:

> *"We live in the community that they live in. There is no way that we live it down or ever forget it. We won't forget it. It's not like a social worker who comes into a family does something makes a hash of it and never sees them again. You know, we see them at the supermarket, we see them at a hui, we see them at rugby, it's a real accountable way of working."*

This accountability ensures that mistakes are faced directly within the community, enhancing the depth of responsibility that kaimahi carry. The intertwining of personal and professional accountability fosters a high level of commitment and care. Sometimes, however, it can bring challenges. One kaimahi described the demands and realities of working within their own hapū given the sensitive and serious nature of the work. The role is intense, when dealing, for example, with severe situations such as sexual abuse or the death of community members. Kaimahi recounted instances of receiving urgent notifications and needing to give immediate support to whānau and community members. This was not a weakness of whakapapa-based approaches, but it was seen as a reflection of the realities of what this could involve.

Kaimahi also drew on the paradigm of whakapapa when describing their work as more than merely a profession. As one of their kaimahi articulated, "we work in the field, but I don't see this as a field of work. I actually see it as a whakapapa connection, and this is just one space I do that in." She expressed how she views her mahi as a contribution to whakapapa.

Another kaimahi recognised used the term whakapapa not just in terms of the relationships of any given child and whānau, but also the whakapapa of the trauma within that whānau. She argued that separation, while sometimes necessary for immediate safety, can have long-term detrimental effects on children and their whānau. It is, as she described it, a "cycle of trauma". For NISS, responding to this is about understanding and looking at the child as a whole to assess how to transform that trauma, rather than continue to transfer it.

One kaimahi suggested that if there is one thing that could make a difference for tamariki, it would be connecting them to three safe whakapapa-related adults. The idea is that if every child has three whakapapa-related safe adults that they could rely on, social services might become unnecessary. By ensuring tamariki have these three adults, we can build a support network that strengthens their wellbeing and safety.

There was a sense from kaimahi that the ability to use both Māori and non-Māori paradigms could be another strength. They described how although there has always been an emphasis on tikanga and mātauranga Māori, over the years there has been a shift in how NISS have engaged with Western paradigms. One kaimahi observed that today, there is a growing number of Ngāpuhi who are savvy about utilising Western frameworks to advance their own cultural and political goals. Importantly, however, this did not come at the cost of Māori frameworks. This was described as a change from earlier generations, where even discussing colonisation and decolonisation was met with resistance or would not even be up for discussion.

"You know, I see the generation really savvy about being quite selective about our needs, being quite selective for the needs of mokopuna."

"Name something that will take us forward"

Kaimahi discussed whether the term 'decolonisation' resonates for them when describing the work they do, and the broader kaupapa their work forms part of. Most were of the view that decolonisation, as it is typically understood, reflects a deficit mindset. In their perspective, the word decolonisation is perceived as focusing what is lost, rather than as a constructive move towards the future. In contrast, 'indigenisation' or 're-indigenisation' was seen as a more constructive alternative. One speaker noted:

"It's still a name, it's not an answer... instead of using decolonisation which is taking us back, name something that will take us forward."

Another experienced kaimahi recalled a time when decolonisation became a more prominent concept within Ngāpuhi's collective consciousness. The timeline of this emergence was intertwined with the broader social conditions experienced by their people at the time. Terms like "colonisation" and "decolonisation" were not merely academic concepts but responses to the lived experiences of Ngāpuhi, which were used as part of a wider collective consciousness.

They also discussed the term 'by Māori, for Māori'. One more experienced kaimahi stated that although this term would later gain prominence, it was not part of the vocabulary when NISS was established. Instead, they talked about whānau, a term that encapsulated the collective identity and responsibility of caring for our own. Even the concept of hapū, which is now central to many Māori discussions, was not explicitly used very often. Rather, everyone inherently understood their connections and responsibilities through whakapapa. It was described how kaumatua and kuia would refer to younger ones not by their names but by their whakapapa,

acknowledging them as mokopuna of specific whānau, reinforcing the deep interconnections that bound them together.

Beyond these terms, kaimahi also described the wider cultural factors which guide their work. They spoke about how te reo Māori and tikanga are seen as essential, as they provide ways of expressing themselves through language and customs that are specific to them as Māori, and as Ngāpuhi. Kaimahi described being able to take tamariki and rangatahi to their maunga and awa, which is crucial in reconnecting them to their whakapapa. Being physically close to these significant places means they can provide direct experiences for tamariki and rangatahi rather than just talking about them, which can be inherently therapeutic.

They also described how the practice of NISS social workers and youth workers is centred around a reconnection to whakapapa, rather than necessarily a placement inside whakapapa. This connection can occur at many different levels. For tamariki who lack any direct cultural connection, the process often starts with a broader iwi-level connection and gradually narrows to encompass specific hapū, marae and whānau affiliations. Kaimahi described a flexibility of approach that recognised the different needs of different tamariki and whānau. Terms relating to this kind of work resonated more strongly.

"For me the crux of it is decision-making processes"

A recurring theme reiterated by kaimahi was the need for autonomy in decision-making. One kaimahi noted that Māori decision-making processes, rooted in tikanga, should not be overridden by external authorities.

> *"So even FGC, you know the whānau can put through a decision but it can be trumped. What is the point? So there is some decision-making Māori tikanga processes I think that can't be inhibited by someone coming over the top of them. Trusting that, iwi practitioners being confident that we can make those decisions."*

They advocated for a system where iwi practitioners can make decisions based on their cultural practices, asserting that this approach often results in more rigorous self-monitoring than that of Crown agencies. There was a misperception by some that iwi-led initiatives faced less accountability than Crown-led ones, when in fact the complete opposite was true.

Some of the challenges described above have become more obvious in the past two years, as many of the legislative mechanisms for this work have increasingly come under threat. These changes remain at the forefront of the minds of the kaimahi of NISS, the kaimahi and leaders of other Ngāpuhi-mandated organisations, and of Ngāpuhi uri generally. Their ongoing advocacy has included extensive submissions on relevant legislation. In 2024 NISS gave an extensive submission in opposition to the repeal of section 7AA, noting (among other things), that the

repeal of section 7AA was likely to disproportionately harm Ngāpuhi tamariki, and undermine the progress that had been made in partnering with Oranga Tamariki prior to that point.[16]

The written submission was accompanied by an oral submission to a Parliamentary Select Committee, but perhaps even more significantly also included a large contingent of Ngāpuhi whānau who travelled from Northland and gathered outside Parliament on the day of the submission to raise further awareness of the issue from a Ngāpuhi perspective.[17] Part of the intent of the travelling and gathering outside parliament was to avoid being constrained by the Crown's processes, instead choosing to advocate for their people on their own terms. This too was an act of tino rangatiratanga.

Though perhaps one of the most prominent examples, that gathering outside of parliament in order to directly advocate for Ngāpuhi tamariki and whānau is far from the only act of advocacy by kaimahi during a time in which Māori interests and te Tiriti rights have come under threat from the actions of the Crown. There have been numerous examples of other submissions made on Bills before parlimentary select committees, both in the realm of iwi social services and in relation to te Tiriti o Waitangi generally, and just as was the case in relation to section 7AA, that work has not been limited to participating in Crown-centred processes. Though the current political moment brings a different level of attention to these issues, in many ways this is simply a continuation of the work that NISS has done for decades, using whatever resources it has to improve outcomes for their tamariki and whānau. Given the vision that the organisation has of a future where Ngāpuhi whānau experience healing and intergenerational oranga, these wider advocacy efforts will no doubt remain a core part of their mission.

[16] Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services. *Ngā Tāpaetanga a Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services Mō Te Pire Oranga Tamariki Kia Whakakorehia Te Wehenga 7AA: Submission of Ngāpuhi Iwi Social Services in respect of the Oranga Tamariki (Repeal of Section 7AA) Amendment Bill.* 2024.
[17] See: Te Ao Māori News, 5 August 2024. *Ngāpuhi protest 7AA repeal at Parliament*. https://www.teaonews.co.nz/2024/08/05/ngapuhi-protest-7aa-repeal-at-parliament/

Key themes from the three case studies

Six key themes have been identified from the three case studies above. These themes describe the ideas which were common across each of the kōrero. The six themes are:

1. **Longevity and resilience** – the commitment to this kaupapa from iwi long pre-dates section 7AA, and will last far longer.
2. **Tikanga** – the work of iwi organisations is deeply grounded in tikanga tuku iho, especially the tikanga of whakapapa. This is just who they are.
3. **Mana motuhake** – this work is explicitly geared towards Māori mana motuhake, with strategic steps being taken towards that goal.
4. **Frustration and pragmatism** – working with the Crown can be time consuming, frustrating and inequitable, but iwi are largely just 'getting on with it', and there are occasional glimmers of hope.
5. **Effectiveness and leadership** – iwi-led child protection initiatives are seen as largely successful, despite the challenges involved.
6. **Kupu māori** – strengths-based, culturally relevant terms like mana motuhake generally resonate more than the word 'decolonisation'.

Each of these six themes is discussed further below.

Longevity and resilience – the commitment to this kaupapa from iwi long pre-dates section 7AA, and will last far longer

All three of the case studies above speak to a commitment to the care and wellbeing of tamariki and whānau Māori that dates back far longer than any one legislative or policy change. This is something that dates back generations, grounded in traditional practices and given expression in each generation depending on the circumstances of the time. Participants spoke about particular aspects of upholding those traditions, such as drawing on the knowledge of elders and the prominent role of wahine Māori. They also emphasised that despite the signficance of policy changes in the 1980s, those changes merely recognised a Māori child protection system, they did not invent it, and for Māori the care of children has never depended on legislation. As one participant put it, "we have been ready for a long time to take our tamariki back."

That said, the 1980s were seen by all three groups of participants as a pivotal time. They spoke about the importance of Pūao Te Ata Tū, and of the mātua whāngai programme which in some ways defined that era. This was discussed as a time of change for many iwi, and as a time when the foundations were built for iwi organisations in their modern form. In some ways that was positive, but participants also described how those formative years some of the modern-day challenges, such as the government's unequal approach to 'partnership', began to take hold. Nevertheless, that era set in motion many of the structures and approaches still seen in iwi organisations today.

Those structures were largely still in place in the years immediately prior to the passing of section 7AA. In those years prior to the signing of 7AA partnerships, both challenges and successes were evident. Some participants described how collaboration was often driven by Crown priorities, with a lack of trust hampering effectiveness, and a contract-driven approach sometimes diminishing more collective decision-making. This work, and the lessons learned from it, provided a foundation for the subsequent 7AA partnership, which further formalised these relationships.

Just as the passing of section 7AA was not seen as the beginning of this work, its repeal was not regarded as the end of it. Interviews for these case studies were conducted as the Bill which repealed section 7AA was passing through Parliament, and participants spoke about how their commitment to this work would last far longer than any political cycle. One spoke about how 7AA, though useful, was not essential to the operation of their service. Whānau, hapū and iwi would remain responsible for the care of their children, and legislation would not change that.

Tikanga – the work of iwi organisations is deeply grounded in tikanga tuku iho, especially the tikanga of whakapapa. This is just who they are.

That sense of longevity was perhaps driven by the strong grounding in tikanga discussed as foundational to all three services. Participants spoke about how those traditional values and tikanga remain constant even in turbulent times. They discussed how the tikanga of their iwi was foundational to their identity as a service, and how that also became foundational to the practices of their staff. They spoke about the importance of a Māori worldview in undertaking this work, and the need for a tikanga-driven child protection system in order to address some of the challenges facing their tamariki and whānau.

One tikanga which was frequently mentioned was that of whakapapa. Participants spoke about whakapapa as being central to their work, and as a way of understanding what has come before, including trauma experienced by tamariki and whānau. Whenua was also discussed, with reconnection to whakapapa and whenua seen as going hand in hand. Wānanga was another tikanga mentioned, in the context of the importance of collective decision-making. The tikanga of whānau was also frequently mentioned.

These tikanga were specifically reflected in the services of all three organisations. One spoke about the creation of safe relationships with whakapapa-related adults being a goal of practice, and of the depth of relationship which existed when kaimahi were related to the whānau they were working with. Practice frameworks had been created based on tikanga, with the ability to be able to draw on both mātauranga Māori and ‘mātauranga Pākehā’ being seen as a strength. Collective decision-making had been a feature of all three organisations since their creation, including with kaumatua and kuia. Overall, it was clear that tikanga was not just an abstract part of their organisational frameworks but a core aspect of their day-to-day practices.

Mana motuhake – this work is explicitly geared towards Māori mana motuhake, and strategic steps are being taken towards that goal

All three of the case studies above speak to a vision for these services that both includes and goes beyond child protection. Participants spoke about fulfilling the vision of Pūao Te Ata Tū, but they also spoke about creating something entirely different from what exists in the current system. One person described the work as 'contribution to whakapapa', and all described the tenacity and long-sightedness required to fulfill that vision. In part this was about addressing the underlying drivers of child protection issues, such as poverty, housing and the impacts of colonisation, but it was also about linking child protection efforts to the wider revitalisation of te reo and tikanga Māori. All of this was grounded in a sense of mana motuhake.

That long-sighted view on mana motuhake impacts the strategic decisions made on how and when to engage with the Crown. Participants spoke about the dual need to work within the current child protection system but also prevent whānau coming into contact with that system. Achieving this required different forms of engagement with the Crown – sometimes at the level of services but other times at 'rangatira to rangatira' level. This involved asserting tino rangatiratanga while simultaneously engaging in current systems which in some ways diminish rangatiratanga, but always with a strategic view to the future. It also involved proactive and constructive engagement with the Crown, not just reactive engagement on the Crown's terms. There was seen to be benefit for these organisations in knowing how to 'work the system' for the betterment of whānau, while not becoming part of the Crown themselves.

The latter reflected a common discussion in the case studies of the difficulty of implementing change within a child protection system which is still fundamentally Crown-centred. True partnership can be difficult or impossible when the overall system is still not grounded in tikanga. One person spoke about how kaupapa Māori models cannot work within a Crown system, while another stated that iwi can often bear the blame when things go wrong, even though the Crown remain in control. All three case studies discussed how simply putting kupu Māori in legislation is not enough, as demonstrated by the failure to reduce Māori inequities since kupu Māori were first inserted into the law in 1989. Some participants discussed how the vision of those 1989 reforms were never fully embedded, and how ongoing reliance on the Crown by iwi can perpetuate a flawed system.

Some participants also spoke about how ongoing reliance on the Crown-centred child protection system has at times inhibited the reclamation of mātauranga Māori and mātauranga-ā-iwi in relation to tamariki and whānau. There was a general recognition that tikanga would never be a silver bullet in the hands of the Crown. Perhaps as a result, all three case studies discussed the need for more fundamental devolution and reform. There was a wariness of superficial change from government which in reality doesn't shift underlying systems. Oranga Tamariki's approach to devolution was described as being too rigid and prescribed. There was a sense that the success of more fundamental transformation of child protection systems would require a more meaningful transfer of power than currently enabled by the Crown. That would also need to involve examination of other institutions within the broader state-centred child protection system, such as the Family Court.

Iwi were, and are, already engaged in strategic steps towards realising this vision. One of the steps described was the need to build capacity, not just within their own organisations but within other kaupapa Māori and iwi-based services. Participants spoke about sharing insights with other iwi and taking a collective approach to learning from each other. The Crown was sometimes seen as a barrier to this, promoting 'competition over collaboration'. Capacity building was seen as necessary both to 'weather the storm' and also be ready to respond when future opportunities for reform arose. A lack of resources and infrastructure among iwi was seen as making this challenging, though not impossible, as other factors could sometimes overcome those shortcomings (such as strong community relationships). Self-sufficiency and sustainability, rather relying on the government for funding and contracts, were seen as an important building block towards mana motuhake.

Advocacy on behalf of their communities was also seen as crucial. Participants spoke about how the voices of whānau needed to inform practice decisions, service improvements and advocacy for system reform. That advocacy often needed to engage with Parliament and other Crown-centred processes, but there was a strong sense of iwi also needing to advocate on their own terms as well (which they frequently already did). This was seen not as something new but as the continuation of past work to present the collective voice of whānau, hapū and iwi to decision-makers, again on terms set by those whānau, hapū and iwi members themselves.

Frustration and pragmatism – working with the Crown can be time consuming, frustrating and unequitable, but iwi are largely just 'getting on with it', and there are occasional glimmers of hope

Throughout all three case studies there was a strong sense of the frustration of working with the Crown, though in all three instances there were also examples of times when that had gone well. In terms of the frustrations, participants spoke about the frequent need to remind Oranga Tamariki and other Crown agencies that iwi are not just service providers, they are also Tiriti partners. The state was seen as making assumptions about its role, and needing to be reminded of its obligations as a Tiriti partner. There was a certain assertiveness required to do this, one person spoke about the need to 'demand' respect.

The challenge of resource imbalances was frequently mentioned, as well as the deeper theme of power imbalances. Resourcing for iwi-based social services was described as completely insufficient, though some participants also acknowledged that resourcing within the state-centred child protection system could be poor as well. This limited the potential of partnerships, though some participants spoke about how section 7AA had at least improved this issue slightly. Nevertheless, iwi could be beholden to the Crown given these resource imbalances, which exacerbated friction and culture clashes. There was a sense of frustration that Crown agencies sometimes don't appreciate the resources required to even engage in government processes, such as bidding for contracts, due to the technicalities of doing so. This further highlighted the power imbalances between iwi and the Crown,

A sense of frustration with the Crown existed at both a system level and a practice level. At a system level there was a sense that the Crown's processes for partnering with iwi or funding iwi social services could inhibit mana motuhake by diminishing tikanga-based ways of operating. Bureaucratic and contract-driven approaches could create siloes within iwi, and 'jumping through the Crown's hoops' could be draining and time consuming. There was a frustration with the fact that the Crown was imposing these further impositions when they were seen as having caused many of the problems at issue in the first place, and a sense that Crown priorities could be narrow and short-sighted. Some of these challenges had improved with the signing of a strategic partnership agreement, but others remained in place. Sometimes partnership with Oranga Tamariki was seen as much more feasible at a local level than a national level.

Those frustrations could also play out at the level of individual practice decisions. There was a 'culture clash' described between a focus on individual children (which was generally regarded as the primary emphasis of Oranga Tamariki) and a broader focus on whānau (which was seen as a higher priority for iwi). There was frustration at the inconsistency of some Oranga Tamariki staff, with high turnover an issue, and frustration at the lack of cultural competence and tikanga knowledge of some social workers. Participants also discussed the frequent delays experienced by tamariki and whānau in contact with Oranga Tamariki. Oranga Tamariki staff were sometimes perceived as having a lower sense of urgency for cases which iwi social service staff would see as requiring more attention. A lack of personal connection with the whānau they were working with was regarded by some participants as a possible reason for this.

For all of those frustrations, there were also glimmers of hope. There were positive examples of collaboration with Oranga Tamariki mentioned, and descriptions given of trusting relationships between iwi organisations and Oranga Tamariki staff, especially at a local level. Participants spoke about the value of having 'allies' inside Oranga Tamariki who could help iwi navigate bureaucratic systems, foster whanaungatanga and improve communication. Some participants shared the view that Oranga Tamariki was still necessary in some form, albeit a more limited one ideally. Partnership was seen as necessary and useful both in and of itself and as a means to achieving mana motuhake in future. Some participants described still believing in partnership despite giving examples of frequent challenges.

One final theme that came through in this regard was how the strategic partnerships created following the passage of section 7AA had had more of an impact on Oranga Tamariki than it had on iwi – as one participant described, "7AA is for the Crown". Participants described how section 7AA gave clarity to Oranga Tamariki about their role, and gave a mandate to some Oranga Tamariki staff to practice in ways which they wouldn't have otherwise been able to. Another impact in this regard was that section 7AA was seen as having aligned the priorities of Oranga Tamariki at local, regional and national levels, which had otherwise been quite disjointed at times. Some participants worried that these improvements, incremental as they had been, were now at risk due to section 7AA's repeal.

Effectiveness and leadership – iwi-led child protection initiatives are seen as largely successful, despite the challenges involved

Each group of participants spoke about the things they saw as the biggest enablers to the success of their services. Several spoke about how having whakapapa connections to the tamariki and whānau they were working with was a strength, rather than the conflict it could sometimes be perceived as being. They spoke about iwi organisations having far greater reach with the whānau most at risk or in need of services, and how they were able to work with those whānau more effectively than the state could. Though participants were modest above their achievements, often this seemed to come down to local leadership and strong relationships among kaupapa Māori organisations in their regions. Participants described successful efforts to prevent the removal of tamariki into the care of the state or prevent whānau from coming to the attention of the state in the first place. The alignment of their services with other kaupapa Māori services (connected either formally or informally to their own) gave them a greater capacity to respond to a broader range of challenges depending on the needs of their whānau.

Each of the three organisations had been careful about how to align their services to achieve those outcomes. For example, all three had given thought to whether their goal was to serve all iwi members across the country, or just those in their area, or all whānau Māori in their rohe. The three services had reached different conclusions, but all had done so deliberately, with a view to their long-term aspirations. Each service looked different – some were focused on frontline operations while others were more hands off, but all recognised that flexibility and adaptability were necessary. It was suggested that the Crown also needed to be flexible, and recognise that a formulaic approach to devolving services would not be effective. Some participants described the increasing pressure on iwi to take on work beyond the scope of their original partnership agreement with Oranga Tamariki, especially given the strain which community services (not to mention Oranga Tamariki itself) were increasingly under due to funding cuts.

A core theme in discussions about the effectiveness of iwi-based services was that of accountability. There was a sense that individuals with whakapapa connections are deeply accountable to each other. Participants saw their primary accountability as to their iwi, not the Crown. Participants challenged the misperception of lower accountability in iwi organisations, stating that accountability increases in a tikanga based system rather than disappearing, as whakapapa connections create far stronger obligations than contractual agreements. The intertwining of personal and professional accountability due to those connections was sometimes a challenge but was usually seen as being a strength, rather than a weakness.

Kupu māori – strengths-based, culturally relevant terms like mana motuhake generally resonate more than the word ‘decolonisation’

The final theme identified from the case studies was that the term ‘decolonisation’ may not always be the best word to describe this work. This may be for several reasons. Some

participants spoke about how it has more deficit-focused connotations, when what is being described is simply about returning to cultural roots and values. Similarly, others spoke about the need for terms which 'take us forward'. It was suggested that there could still sometimes be a role for terms like colonisation and decolonisation when raising people's consciousness regarding these topics, but that they didn't need to be the core focus.

Some participants spoke about 'by Māori, for Māori', but others suggested that this was not a prominent word when iwi social services were first formed, and didn't always fit well now either. Words like 'indigenisation' may sometimes have a place, but there was a general suggestion that terms like mana motuhake, whakapapa and whenua would resonate more with most people. There was a preference for terms that would be widely understood, particularly in Māori communities, over academic terminology. In this sense, the need is for not just 'kupu Māori' (te reo Māori words), but also 'kupu māori' (normal or natural words).

There is an alignment here with the terms participants used to describe the underlying goals of the work in general. Whakapapa was seen as central to the Māori-led child protection system, and mana motuhake was seen as better capturing the enduring commitment to this system held by Māori organisations, communities and individuals. These concepts may therefore be central to both the substantial shift required, and the language used to describe that shift.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction of this report, one of the overarching themes of these case studies is that on the whole, the Māori-led child protection system seems to have a different sense of time than its state-centred equivalent. In statutory child protection systems there is often a pendulum effect, where one policy direction is quickly discarded in favour of another, then vice versa. The recent repeal of section 7AA, despite only coming into force in 2019, is an example of this, illustrating the impact that the political context has on these swings.

This stands in contrast to some of the insights shared in these case studies, where participants spoke about a far longer commitment to addressing the challenges which drive child protection system contact for tamariki and whānau Māori. At a systemic level this was about embedding policies which outlasted political cycles, but this was also present at a practice level, for example in discussions about the perceived lack of urgency from some social workers.

This different sense of time is perhaps unsurprising given the wider cultural revitalisation context. In te reo Māori revitalisation initiatives, for example, it is recognised that language revitalisation must happen on intergenerational timeframes. Similarly, aspects of the case studies in this report acknowledge here that meaningful progress will require fundamental transformation to child protection systems, and that those changes will not happen overnight. But importantly, those longer timeframes do not represent a lesser commitment, which cannot always be said for politically driven child protection reforms. The opposite is true – the participants in this report all described a deep, long-term commitment to this kaupapa. As one of them put it, "moving mountains is something we are quite used to."

When planning for this project began, those long-term shifts are what was hoped to be captured by using the term 'decolonisation'. Decolonisation requires transfers of power, distribution of resources and a commitment to centring Māori worldviews, and this research reinforces that transforming the child protection system will require those things as well. However, it also suggests that 'decolonisation' may not always be the most effective way to describe those shifts, or at best may be incomplete. As Māori, describing that shift in our own terms may be a crucial piece of the puzzle. Restoring whānau, reconnecting to whakapapa and realising mana motuhake requires transfers of resources and power just as much as 'decolonisation' does.

Perhaps this different sense of time was also why the participants who took part in this study seemed to have a strong sense that their work would outlast whatever setbacks it was currently facing. Legislative changes and the rise in anti-Tiriti sentiment have had an impact on these organisations, but there was also a sense that the current storm would pass. Particular policies may come and go, but what will remain is the enduring commitment to whānau, whakapapa and mana Māori motuhake.