



SOCIAL EQUITY AND WELLBEING NETWORK

TUIA TE ORANGA

Christchurch Community House
301 Tuam St
CHRISTCHURCH 8011

Charities Commission Reg CC 26511

Phone: (03) 366 2050
Email: Sharon@sewn.org.nz
Web: www.sewn.org.nz

22 June 2016

Submission to the Social Security Rewrite Bill

Introduction:

Social Equity & Wellbeing Network (SEWN) is a Christchurch-based network of non-profit groups and organisations. The majority of the groups that are part of our network are involved in human services and/or community development. Established in 1978 as the Council of Social Services in Christchurch, we are well networked and highly regarded in the sector.

SEWN supports a rewrite of the Social Welfare legislation to produce a clearer and more understandable structure.

This Bill also introduces significant changes to social security law.

The changes appear to align the legislation with Government's 'investment approach' and target people who have indicators that suggest that they will be most likely to require welfare assistance long-term. However Treasury has recognised that these indicators identified by Government may not *cause* poor outcomes directly, but may be associated with other indicators that could be addressed in other ways.

It is difficult to see how this approach to welfare will bring about marked improvements to the social statistics when we have systemic unemployment; housing shortages and substandard housing; and growing numbers of 'working poor' all working against social wellbeing.

Specific Provisions of the Bill

Discretionary powers:

SEWN is concerned that the discretionary powers of the Department to respond to hardship have been moved to regulations. Future changes to discretionary powers should be able to be fully scrutinized rather than occur through the less rigorous requirements for regulatory changes.

Provision for epidemic:

The legislation provides that exceptional circumstances grants can be given to people who would not otherwise be entitled during an epidemic. We are unsure why this should apply only to an epidemic. New Zealand is vulnerable to earthquakes and volcanic activity, and also increasingly susceptible to civil emergencies caused by extreme weather. We consider that this clause should apply to all civil emergencies.

Meeting obligations:

SEWN is aware of general concern amongst beneficiaries about the hurdles that many experience in trying to meet their obligations. Often these relate to MSD having little recognition of the individual circumstances of the beneficiary, or information being confusing or incomplete.

This could be improved by setting obligations for MSD to meet. MSD should be obliged to inform people so they can understand their entitlements and obligations are and what “good and sufficient” reason might be. It might also be obliged to assure itself that people do understand the information they have been given and be able to demonstrate this.

Timeframes and other criteria for compliance should recognise different personal circumstances. For instance people living rurally have slower mail delivery, less reliable internet services, and long distances to travel over country roads that can be demanding to drive in poor weather conditions. It is more difficult to access services that the beneficiary may be obliged to engage with, e.g. early learning centres, well child checks, and drug testing or rehabilitation services.

Conclusion:

While the intent to make the legislation more easy to negotiate and understand is commendable, the punitive nature of much of this legislation suggests a focus on driving people “off the books” in an attempt to reduce welfare statistics rather than a people-centred approach.

We note that the Government’s Investment Strategy has an inherent tension between its stated focus on achieving social, economic and environmental objectives that the market cannot deliver alone, and its Principle no 10 that focuses on fiscal strategy and balance sheet targets. It is important that that tension be balanced, and legislation is not directed at enabling arbitrary fiscal targets to be met at the expense of an empowering, effective and just social security system.



Sharon Torstonson
Executive Officer