

## Families Panels – a genuinely collaborative way of working

### Introduction

In this paper we consider the innovative practice and relationship that underpins the Families Commission's Families Panels. Our intention is to explore how a different, more flexible and equitable relationship with social service and support organisations works in practice.

Following an overview of the Families Panels and the principles that underpin the approach, we show how they work in practice, and then signpost their effectiveness to briefly indicate the rich and multi-layered benefits emerging from this genuinely collaborative way of working.

This paper should be considered together with the companion paper, *Families Panels – What's the difference that's making a difference, and for whom?*<sup>1</sup> outlines the key elements of how implementing the *Most Significant Change* (MSC) technique (a qualitative participatory monitoring and evaluation tool) has provided some ideas on the impact and the type of change that has occurred within the Families Panels

### Why the Families Panels were created

The Families Panels (originally called Parents Panels) were established in March 2008 primarily to meet the requirements of sub-section 13.1 of the *Families Commission Act 2003*.

*In the exercise and performance of its powers and functions, the Commission must maintain mechanisms (for example, by appointing advisory committees or forming consultation forums) to ensure that there are at all times readily accessible to it the views of*

1. *Māori as tangata whenua*
2. *the Pacific Islands peoples of New Zealand*
3. *other ethnic and cultural groups in New Zealand*
4. *groups that represent families, of one or more kinds of family members, and of groups that have a particular interest in families or in any one or more matters related to the Commission's functions.*

Families Panels provided an opportunity to hear directly from a wide cross-section of families in New Zealand on issues that the Families Commission considered significant. The Panels also provided a forum for the Commission to become aware of, and learn more about, emerging issues for families around New Zealand.

From the beginning, the approach to the Families Panels was different from other groups the Commission had convened. Rather than bringing people together with a specific outcome in mind (focus groups), Families Panels were conceived as discussion groups. As such, the Panels provided an inquiring space where conversations with families provided an

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<sup>1</sup> *Families Panels - What's the difference that's making a difference, and for whom?* (2012) Patillo, Wellington (Insert URL when available)

opportunity to work in an authentically collaborative way to the mutual benefit<sup>2</sup> of all those concerned.

### **How the Families Panels work**

Organisations, typically non-government organisations (NGOs), which have a trusted relationship within their community are identified by the Commission and approached to establish a group of 8–12 people who share a common circumstance. For example, groups have included teen fathers, single parent families, new migrants and rural families. The Commission deliberately keeps the family situations reasonably broad to enable organisations to choose the most appropriate makeup of the Panels.

The Commission provides financial and advisory support to the identified organisations to enable them to bring participants together three times per year to discuss issues affecting families. In addition to the discussion topics set by the Commission, participants are given the opportunity to explore ‘hot topics’, issues that are ‘front and centre’ for them at the time.

Each organisation facilitates their Panel according to the needs of the participants. Organisations have the flexibility to choose when, where and how they hold and facilitate their Panels. Organisations are contracted for one year with an option of renewal for a second.

The Families Commission brings the Panel facilitators to Wellington to meet together twice a year. This occurs at the beginning of the yearly cycle, for orientation and sharing, prior to any panel discussions being held. They meet again at the end of the yearly cycle, for reflection and farewell, after the completion of three panel discussions.

The Commission recruits four to six community organisations each year, maintaining between 8-12 Families Panels encompassing a diverse range of families across New Zealand. A staged and supportive approach to recruitment facilitates information exchange and creates peer-learning opportunities between organisations. Since March 2008, 26 different organisations from across the country have participated in Families Panels.<sup>3</sup>

The Families Panels are based on a philosophy that values building and maintaining respectful and trusting relationships over time. They are underpinned by engagement that requires the work to be:

- purposeful
- respectful
- ethical
- built on reciprocity
- professionally competent
- reflective

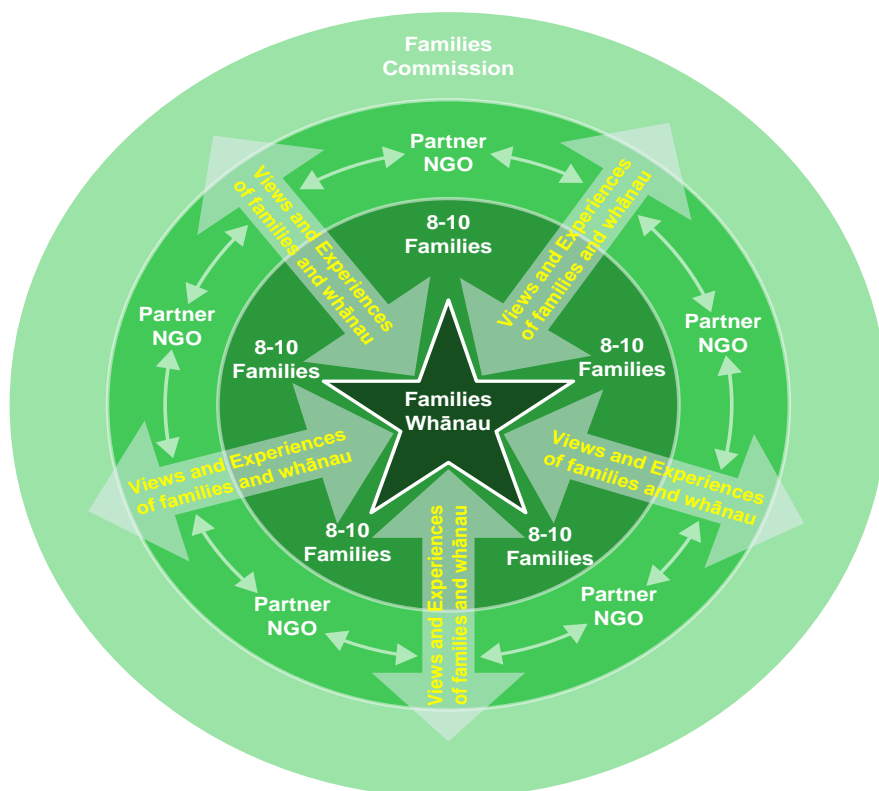
This relational approach works across cultural, economic and social boundaries.

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to *Families Panels - What's the difference that's making a difference, and for whom?* (2012) Patillo, Wellington  
(Insert URL available)

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1 for a list of participant organisations

**Figure 1: The Families Panels – an overview**



**In conversation with families: Family Whānau centred practice in action**

Figure 1 provides an overview of how the Families Panels are set up and how they work. This process enables the Commission to keep in touch with the views and experiences of families around New Zealand. However, the Families Panels accomplish a great deal more than this. A recent evaluation of the Families Panels found they also make cost effective contributions to:

- confidence building for individuals and within families
- capacity building for organisations
- connecting communities.<sup>4</sup>

To understand why this is, and following the tenet, “there is nothing as practical as a good theory”<sup>5</sup> it’s important to look at the ideas (theory) and actions that inform the Families Panels process.

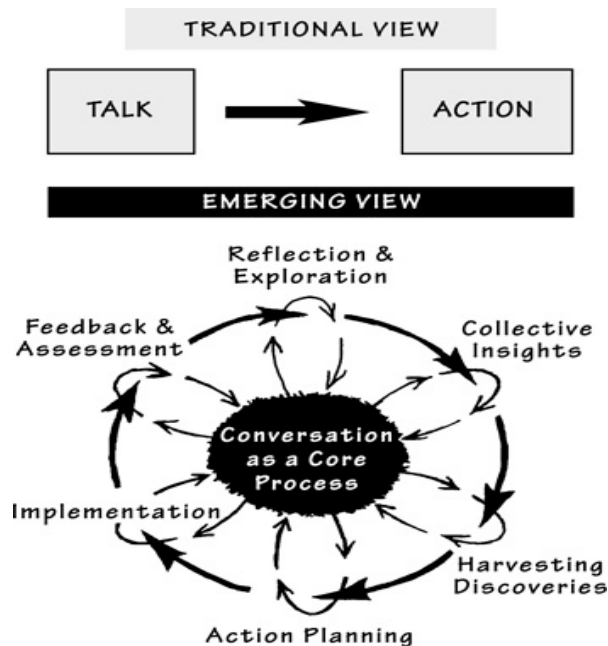
There are three critical factors that create and sustain the success and effectiveness of the Families Panels process.

<sup>4</sup> Families Panels – What’s the difference that’s making a difference, and for whom? (2012) Patillo, Wellington - [insert web URL when available](#)

<sup>5</sup> According to Harvard researcher Carol Weiss, see Organization Research Services (2004), Theory of Change: A Practical Tool for Action, Results and Learning <http://www.aecf.org/upload/publicationfiles/cc2977k440.pdf>

1. A shift in the way the people and organisations involved understand the role of conversation as a core process for social inquiry. This is a shift which debunks the widely held notion that talk and action are somehow separate activities. Rather, how we converse together along with what we say is recognised as the, “primary and most influential medium of action in the human universe...”<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 2: Conversation as Core Process<sup>7</sup>**



2. A deep appreciation for, and willingness to create, authentic collaboration amongst participants (the families, the partner NGOs, and the Families Commission) based on mutual respect and trust.
3. An organising principle of family whānau centred practice. Both the Families Commission and its NGO partners work collaboratively with families and whānau using a strengths-based approach that positions and keeps families and whānau at the centre of the work together. Built around the development of respectful, trustworthy and responsive relationships with families and whānau there is a flexible ‘what it takes attitude’ and a recognition that effective work will continue to develop over time.<sup>8</sup>

Together these factors comprise a theory of change, a road map for action that enables knowledge, opinions and concerns to be gathered and shared through an intentional conversational process. This conversational process also facilitates the development of the individuals, organisations and communities involved.

<sup>6</sup> Torbert, Bill (2004). *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership*, San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler

<sup>7</sup> Brown, Juanita and Isaacs, David (2005) *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations that Matter*, San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler

<sup>8</sup> This way of working and its effectiveness is detailed at length in the two-year action inquiry work the Families Commission carried out in collaboration with a group of innovative social service organisations. See, Copas et al (2011), *Thriving: Connected-Reflective-Effective*, and O’Sullivan et al (2011), *Thriving in Practice*.

<http://www.familiescommission.govt.nz/publications-resources/thriving>  
<http://www.familiescommission.govt.nz/publications-resources/thriving-in-practice>

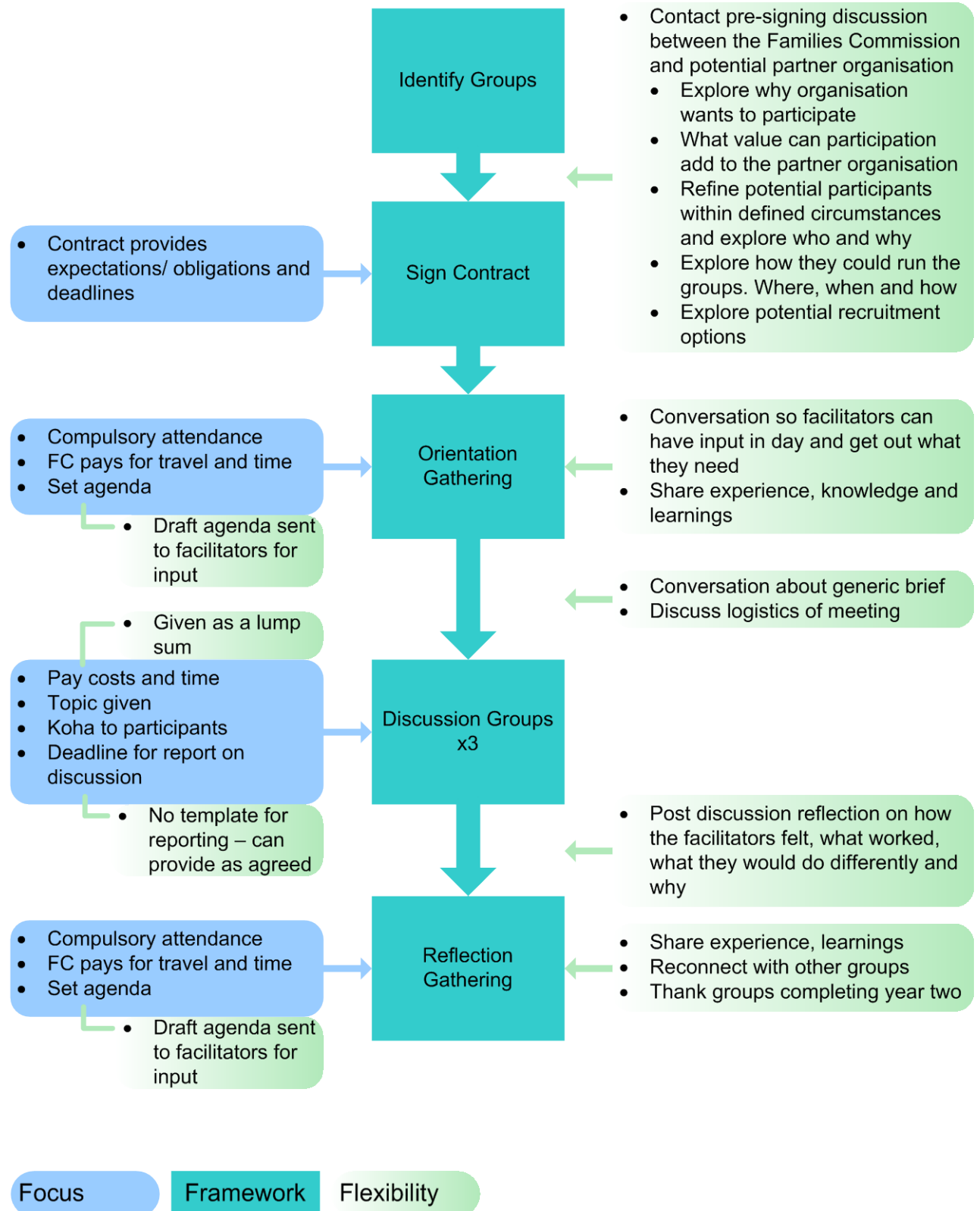
## **The difference that makes a difference – A closer look at The Families Panels process**

Setting up the Families Panels up as a family-whānau centred social inquiry undertaken in collaboration with NGOs has enabled the Families Commission to create a different relationship with partner organisations. This process has three underlining key attributes:

- framework
- focus
- flexibility.

Figure 3 shows this process which repeats each 12 months over a two year cycle. The attributes – framework, focus and flexibility – arise as the process unfolds.

**Figure 3: Families Panels Process**



## Focus, Framework and Flexibility In Practice...

The initial pre-contract signing discussion is always held face-to-face with potential partners usually at their place of work or a nominated space that suits everyone. The purpose of the discussion is to demonstrate and share the underlying values and philosophy of the Families Panels. The Families Commission Families Panels facilitator and representatives of the community NGOs spend this time getting to know each other on personal and professional levels. Questions canvased include:

- Why the organisations might want to facilitate Families Panels?
- What the benefits of being involved in the Families Panels might be to the organisations?
- Who they envisage would participate (which families) and why?
- How they might go about recruiting participants?
- How and where they plan to facilitate the panel discussion meetings?

Each group identifies the value-add that participation in the Families Panels could provide for them. There is no one-size-fits-all, the value varies from group to group.

### **Example** – Father and Child Trust; Group – Teen fathers

Father and Child Trust work with teen fathers (among others). Staff from the organisation found it difficult to engage young dads with the idea to initiate teen father support groups. They found young men did not have any experience of coming together to talk and they were generally suspicious of the process. They hoped that the Families Panels would provide a platform for them to engage with young fathers in a group setting. This has proved to be the case. Since being involved with the Families Panels the Father and Child Trust has established a teen fathers parenting support group with members of the Families Panel participating.

### **Example** – Ranui Action Project (RAP); Group – Urban Māori Whānau

Ranui Action Project was an 'anchor' within their community; however they were aware of people in their community who they were not hearing from. They used the Families Panels as a mechanism to invite these people to contribute and have a say. During the first year of Families Panels conversations they found concern for young people in their neighbourhoods was a persistent theme. As a consequence, in the second year they invited young people to participate in the Families Panels discussion groups and learned a great deal more from their participation.

### **Example** – Wairarapa REAP; Group – Single Parent Families.

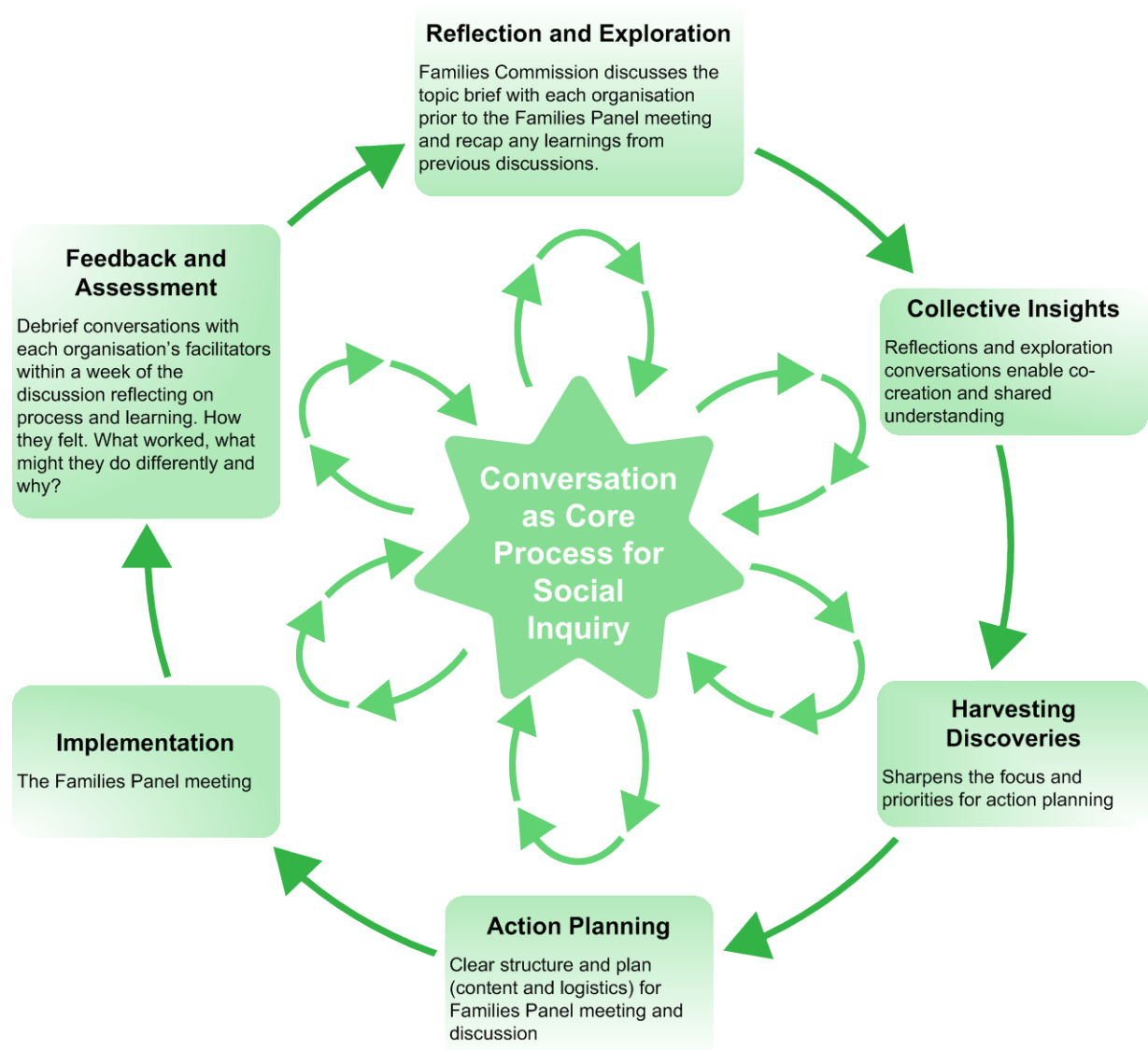
Wairarapa REAP decided to use the Families Panels as a way to create and grow relationships with families in a specific area of the Wairarapa where relationships were not strong and families were not accessing all the services available to them. The Families Panels were recognised as a way to build trusting and respectful relationships over time, to share knowledge, and to build connections within the wider community.

Figure 4 shows the Families Panels cyclical process. Three times per year each Families Panel group holds a discussion about a topic set by the Families Commission. A generic topic brief is sent by the Families Commission Families Panels facilitator to the community NGOs. Facilitators in these organisations hold the meetings and report back to the Families Commission on the conversations. Reports from all the Families Panels across the country are then collated and summarised by the Families Commission



Families Panels facilitator who draws out key themes and points of difference. This report is shared within the Families Commission and with the facilitators of all the groups. An abridged version is also sent to each facilitator to send to Families Panel participants.

**Figure 4: ‘Conversation as Core Process’ in action**



**‘Conversation as Core Process’ in practice**

The following example shows how this conversational process enables the development of authentic collaboration and demonstrates some of the benefits that accrue to all involved.



The Families Commission sent the following generic topic brief to all Families Panel groups.

### **Looking to the future – Our children and young people**

For many, New Zealand is a land of great opportunity, wonderful lifestyle and friendly easy going people. For many, it is a great place to raise children, grow up and live. However, for nearly 1 in 5 children, life is difficult. They experience poverty, preventable third world diseases such as rheumatic fever, over-crowding, neglect and abuse. For too many, the challenges of growing up and living under these circumstances reduce their potential, motivation and opportunities in their adult life.

Children and young people are our future leaders, workers and parents – they will determine the type of country New Zealand is in years to come.

We would like you to think about the question - ***What do we (individuals, families, communities, government) need to do to make New Zealand a better place for our children and young people, today and in the future?***

You might like to think about:

- What do we mean by 'better place'?
- How can communities take responsibility?
  - What is the contribution of individuals? What is my contribution?
  - What is the contribution of business?
  - What is the contribution of schools, community groups, and churches?
  - What is the contribution of government?
- How can families, communities, service providers, business and government work better together for our children and young people?

Thank you for your participation in this Families Panel. We greatly appreciate your time and your willingness to share your thoughts, observations, knowledge and experience with us.

### **Reflection and exploration**

The Families Commission Families Panel facilitator contacts each Community NGO before and after each Families Panel discussion meeting. In a conversation with the facilitators of the Urban Māori whānau group, prior to the panel meeting the Families Commission Families Panel facilitator learned the word '*contribution*' in the above brief had different connotations. For this group it denoted 'koha' or financial contribution, and this did not fit with the intention of the questions. It was agreed that changing the word to '*responsibility*' better reflected the intention of the questions in this particular context.

### **Collective insights**

This insight from the Urban Māori whānau group was in turn shared with the facilitators of other Families Panel groups. Some chose to change the wording to 'responsibility,' others felt 'contribution' was appropriate. With the option of changing the language of the brief, in another discussion it was decided to delete the sentence, '*They experience poverty, preventable third world diseases such as rheumatic fever, over-crowding, neglect and abuse.*' The Families Commission Families Panel facilitator learned many families in this particular group were struggling with a wide range of issues and the NGO

facilitator felt this sentence could negatively impact on the discussion as some families were living these challenges every day.

As these changes were conveyed to other groups some decided to adopt the amendments and others chose to stay with the original. Each NGO facilitator made judgements based on their understanding and relationships with their families.

### **Harvesting discoveries**

Co-creating collective insights also provides opportunities to identify and share effective ideas and practices. For example during a post-panel discussion with the Families Commission Families Panel facilitator about their first meeting, the facilitator from one NGO group commented the families were initially difficult to engage. However, by the end of the meeting they found participants were reluctant to leave – continuing to talk over food, tea and coffee. The Families Commission Families Panel facilitator was able to share the many ways different groups hold their meetings. One Families Panel meets over lunch, sitting around a table. The food is laid out and the conversations begin, moving into the topic brief as the food is shared. Other groups have tea and coffee beforehand to help put people at ease. Harvesting the ideas of others gave the new NGO group the ability to adapt their thinking and planning about how they might organise their next meeting.

### **Action planning**

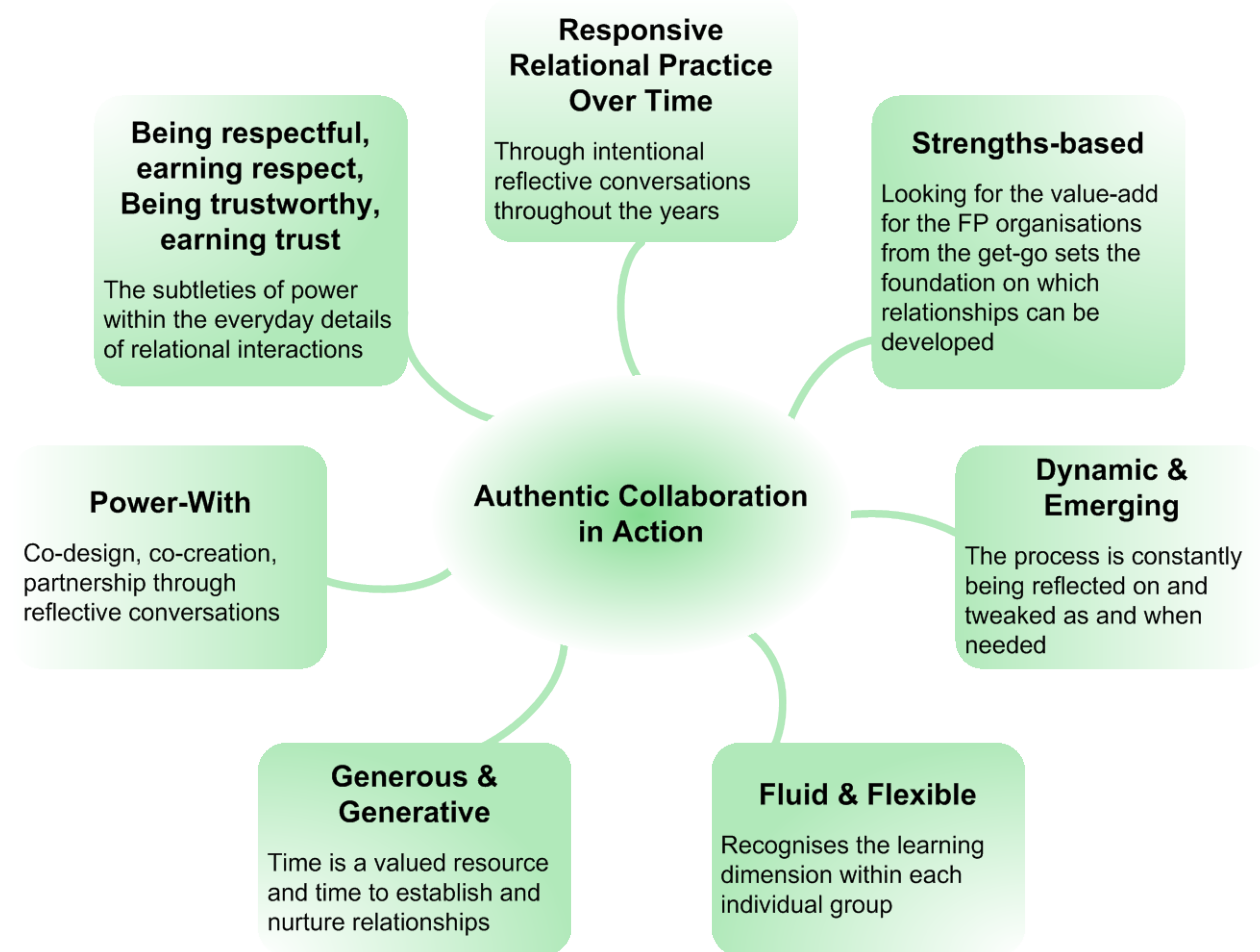
Following the processes of exploration, reflection, collection of insights and harvesting of ideas, the NGO facilitators are much better equipped and able to plan how they want to conduct their discussion meetings. The Families Commission Families Panel facilitator is also much better equipped to support the partner organisations, and this also plays a pivotal role in co-creating useful, actionable knowledge.

### **Feedback and assessment**

The post-panel conversation with the Families Commission Families Panel facilitator is also important as it provides an opportunity for NGO facilitators to reflect on their panel discussion, the dynamics of the group, what worked well, and what could be improved on. This conversation generally occurs by phone within a week of the meeting date. The scheduling is important as it allows NGO facilitators time to reflect on the experience of running the group while it is still fresh. The learning from this feedback and assessment is in turn utilised as the cycle starts again with a new topic brief for the next Families Panels discussion meeting.

This integrated process of continuous development and refinement built around respectful, trustworthy and responsive relationships is an example of working together in authentic collaboration. It is a way of working that creates actionable knowledge that contributes to a multi-layered value-add that benefits all those participating. The figure below illustrates the characteristics of authentic collaboration which are demonstrated most of the time in the Families Panels process.

**Figure 5: The Characteristics of Authentic Collaboration**



**Conclusion: Listening, learning and effecting change together**

The Families Panels bring people together from around New Zealand to talk with one another about specific and topical issues affecting their lives. The way they are set up, funded and put into practice, using conversation as a core process for social inquiry, creates trusting relationships and actionable knowledge that benefits the individuals, organisations and communities participating.

This authentically collaborative approach is about changing paradigms for what practice looks like, feels like and works like for all involved. The Families Commission has developed a genuine high trust, flexible and focused framework that enables it to work with its NGO partners in a way that creates mutual responsibility for the shared mission of understanding families' lives better and using this knowledge to effect positive change.

Working in an authentically collaborative way takes time and the genuine commitment of everyone involved. The experience of the Families Panels shows the time and commitment invested is repaid exponentially with multi-layered benefits far richer than those more traditional practice models generally achieve.

## **Appendix 1: Organisations which have participated in the Families Panels process**

### **March 2008 – June 2009**

- Royal New Zealand Plunket Society (Dargaville) – Families with young children
- Mangere East Family Services Centre – Pacific Island families
- Auckland Women’s Centre – Teen mothers
- Barnardos (Royal Oak) – ‘Mortgage belt’ families.

### **July 2008 – June 2010**

- CCS Disability Action (Wellington) – Families with a child with a disability
- Grandparents raising Grandchildren (Wellington)
- Victory Primary School (Nelson) – Chinh (Burmese) refugees
- Miramar Baptist Church – Fathers and grandfathers
- St John of God Waipuna Youth and Community Services Trust (Christchurch) – families with teenagers.

### **July 2009 – June 2011**

- Parents Centre (Greymouth) – Families with young children
- Central Otago REAP – Families living in rural environments
- Family Works (Dunedin) – Single Parent Families
- Ranui Action Project (west Auckland) – Urban Māori whānau
- Whakauae Research for Maori Health and Development (Whanganui) – Whānau / whanui from Ngati Hauiti.

### **July 2010 – June 2012**

- Father and Child Trust (Christchurch) – Teen Fathers
- Pacific Island Safety and Prevention Project – “The Project” Auckland) - Pacific Island families
- Donald Beasley Institute (Dunedin) – Families that include a parent with a disability (to June 2011)
- Chinese New Settlers Services Trust (Auckland) - Chinese Immigrant families
- Somali Council (Wellington) - Somali Refugee families (to June 2011)
- Windsor Park Baptist Church (Auckland) - Urban middle New Zealand families.

### **July 2011 – June 2012**

- disAbilities Resources Centre (Invercargill) – Families that include a parent with a disability (replaced Donald Beasley Institute)
- Auckland Somali Community Association (Auckland) – Somali Refugee families (replaced Somali Council)
- OUTLine NZ (Auckland) – Same sex parent families
- Te Kura Kaupapa Maori O Rangiawhia (Kaitaia) – Rural Māori whānau
- Te Unga Waka Marae (Auckland) – Urban Māori whānau
- Wairarapa REAP (Masterton) – Single Parent families.