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Putting local children's interests into local decisions

Dr Kirsten Hanna and Nic Mason senior researchers with AUT University's Institute of Public Policy

In the mid-2000s, researchers set out to establish the potential impact on children of proposed reform of the Bosnia and Herzegovina energy sector. Part of the study involved asking caregivers and service providers (such as schools and health facilities) how they would cope with the expected increase in energy costs. It also involved asking children how they thought their lives would be affected. The conclusions reached by the analysts were sobering. On the basis of statistical and qualitative data, the researchers predicted that the reform would impact negatively on children across a range of domains: their education, health, access to social services, physical safety, and opportunities for play and leisure. To mitigate these impacts, the analysts proposed a reduction in electricity tariffs for public service providers and a range of anti-poverty measures to “cushion the impact of reforms on vulnerable households.”¹

As this example illustrates, public policy decisions can impact heavily on children in ways that are not always obvious. Yet it is all too rare for official decision-making processes to incorporate robust, evidence-informed consideration of how children's well-being might be affected. The costs to children of poor decisions can be devastating. The costs to society of poor outcomes for children are simply too high to bear. Nonetheless, children's interests remain largely invisible in decision-making processes.

The new Auckland Council and its seven Council-Controlled Organisations (CCOs) will be reviewing and consolidating a phenomenal range of strategies and policies – from dog laws to footpath policy, water pricing structures to waste strategies, not to mention redefining and purchasing millions of dollars worth of contracts for services, such as public transport and park management.

But will the decisions made be harmful or beneficial for Auckland’s children? One way to find out would be to incorporate ‘child impact assessments’, like the one conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, into decision-making processes. Child impact assessments consider the likely impact on children of policies, legislation, services and other public policy measures (“proposals”) *before* the proposal is finalised. Potential impacts—both positive and negative—are identified, and alternatives provided that could mitigate negative impacts and, where possible, maximise benefits. The process recognises that children are entitled to be heard in decisions that affect them and that, as experts on their own lives, children’s views can enrich the information base upon which decisions are made. The ultimate aim is that, by incorporating a child lens into policy processes across an authority, actions undertaken will work in concert to improve conditions for children, to create the sorts of environments that allow children to thrive.

Table 1 : Framework for a *comprehensive* child impact assessment²

<p><u>The proposal</u>: A brief description of the proposal, including its rationale, aims and objectives and other relevant contextual information.</p> <p><u>Impacts</u>: The likely impacts of the proposal on children (or sub-groups of children) and whether these are positive or negative according to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The scientific literature on children’s well-being and expert opinion, with reference to children’s physical, social and emotional development. ○ The views of children and other stakeholders on the proposal. ○ Consistency with other relevant policies and strategies, etc. <p>This should include consideration of impacts in various domains in which children spend their lives, such as home, school and neighbourhoods, as well as the scale and probability of impact.</p> <p><u>Competing interests</u>: Any conflicts between the interests of children and other constituencies/imperatives (or between different groups of children, e.g., a girls and boys analysis) inherent in the proposal and its likely effects.</p> <p><u>Alternatives</u>: Options for mitigating or removing negative impacts and enhancing positive impacts, with a comparison of the various options (e.g., a cost/benefit analysis or other, as appropriate).</p> <p><u>Justifications</u>: When other interests are prioritised over children’s, a justification for doing so.</p> <p><u>Evaluation</u>: Monitoring and evaluating the actual impact of the proposal once it is implemented against the expected impacts as well as the assessment process itself.</p>

Conducting high quality, comprehensive child impact assessments would require time, resources, and political will; they would require access to accurate information (including up-to-date and disaggregated data about child well-being) and knowledge of how a given proposal interacts with the work of other council agencies. Given the resource

implications, it would be impractical to assess *all* of the proposals of the new city. But it would be possible to target particular policies for assessment, such as those that are likely to have a substantial and direct impact on children.

A prime example would be the work that will need to be undertaken to harmonise rates across the city—from the poorest communities in Counties-Manukau to the affluent communities in the North. The impact on children of rates increases could be as wide-ranging and serious as those predicted in the Bosnia and Herzegovina study. Hence, as part of the decision-making process, officials should establish how any increases might affect the ability of households, service providers, community facilities and others to provide for children's needs and how any negative impacts might be mitigated through, for example, rates reductions for those entities.

The new city has an opportunity to get it right for children, provided there is political will to do so. The value of targeted child impact assessments is they avoid the preventable blunders that can arise when children's interests are overlooked, while also seeking opportunities to improve conditions for children. Such a process can enable our local elected members and officials to demonstrate their commitment to the next generation's current needs and strengths. As citizens of this city, we should demand no less.

¹ Krieger, Y. P., & Ribar, E. (2009). Child Rights Impact Assessment of Proposed Electricity Price Increases in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 19(2), 176-201.

² This list draws together the issues suggested in the child impact assessment literature (Payne, L. (2002). *Children's Rights and Child Impact Analysis: Making Children Visible in Government. Support for Learning*, 3, 128-132. Office of the Children's Ombudsman in Sweden. (2006). *Child Impact Analysis*. Stockholm: Office of the Children's Ombudsman in Sweden. Angus, J. (2007). *Placing Children at the Centre of Policy Making: A Discussion Paper on Child Impact Assessment*. Wellington: Ministry of Social Development. Sylwander, L. (2001). *Child Impact Assessments: Swedish Experience of Child Impact Analyses as a Tool for Implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Stockholm: Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Corrigan, C. (2006). *The Development and Implementation of Child Impact Statements in Ireland*. Dublin: Office of the Minister for Children. Mason, N., & Hanna, K. (2009). *Undertaking Child Impact Assessments in Aotearoa New Zealand Local Authorities: Evidence, Practice, Ideas*. Auckland: Institute of Public Policy, AUT University. Paton, L., & Munro, G. (2006). *Children's Rights Impact Assessment: The SCCYP Model*. Edinburgh: Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People.), supplemented by the literature on other types of impact assessment, in particular Radaelli, C. M. (2005). Diffusion without Convergence: How Political Context Shapes the Adoption of Regulatory Impact Assessment. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 12(5), 924-943. The paper prepared by J. Angus, Consultant, does not represent the policy of New Zealand's Ministry of Social Development.