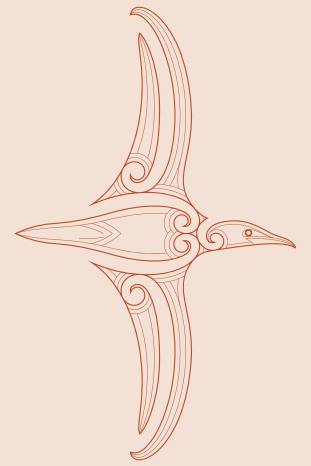
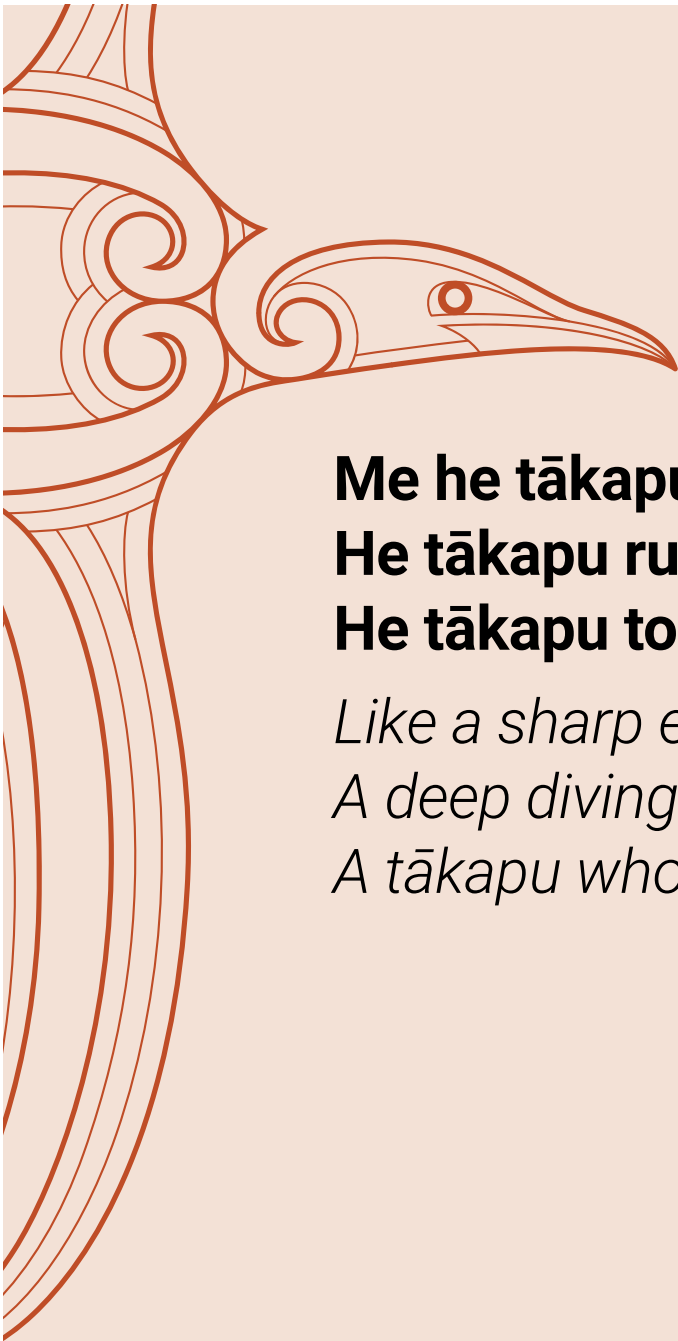


# Returning Home From Care

An in-depth look at the experiences and practices surrounding tamariki and rangatahi cared for at home while in State custody.





**Me he tākapu matakana  
He tākapu ruku hōhonu  
He tākapu tohatoha hua**

*Like a sharp eyed tākapu  
A deep diving tākapu  
A tākapu who shares*

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**Te Kāwanatanga o Aotearoa**  
New Zealand Government

# Foreword

Aroturuki Tamariki, the Independent Children's Monitor, was established in 2019. Our role was expanded in 2023, under the *Oversight of the Oranga Tamariki System Act*, to monitor the wider oranga tamariki system.

In this review we look at the experiences and practices surrounding tamariki and rangatahi cared for at home by their parent/s while in the custody of the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki. This includes what practice, services and supports are wrapped around tamariki, rangatahi and their parents to ensure a safe return, or remain, home. We look at what works well, and what doesn't, to inform future return home transitions.

For many tamariki and rangatahi who are cared for away from their parents, there is an emotional cost. Most do not want to live away from their parents, they want the harm to stop. Being returned to their parents' care, when it is safe and meets all their needs, is the best possible outcome. When they do return home, tamariki and rangatahi, and their parents, must be supported to make sure it has every chance of success.

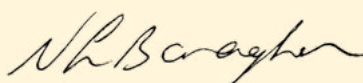
We heard what makes a return home a success and about the many challenges. This review identifies several key areas that require attention to support the goal we all have of tamariki thriving at home. As we found in our recent *Experiences of Care* report, frequency of social worker visits, communication between social workers and parents and whānau, collaboration between government agencies, and availability of services are barriers to improved outcomes for tamariki and rangatahi and a successful return home.

We heard about a greater emphasis being placed on returning tamariki and rangatahi to their parent/s. If this is to happen, it is important that clear guidance is in place to support social worker practice, that all agencies ensure that services and supports for tamariki and their whānau are there when they need them, and finally, that adequate self-monitoring is in place to understand what is working well, and areas of risk.

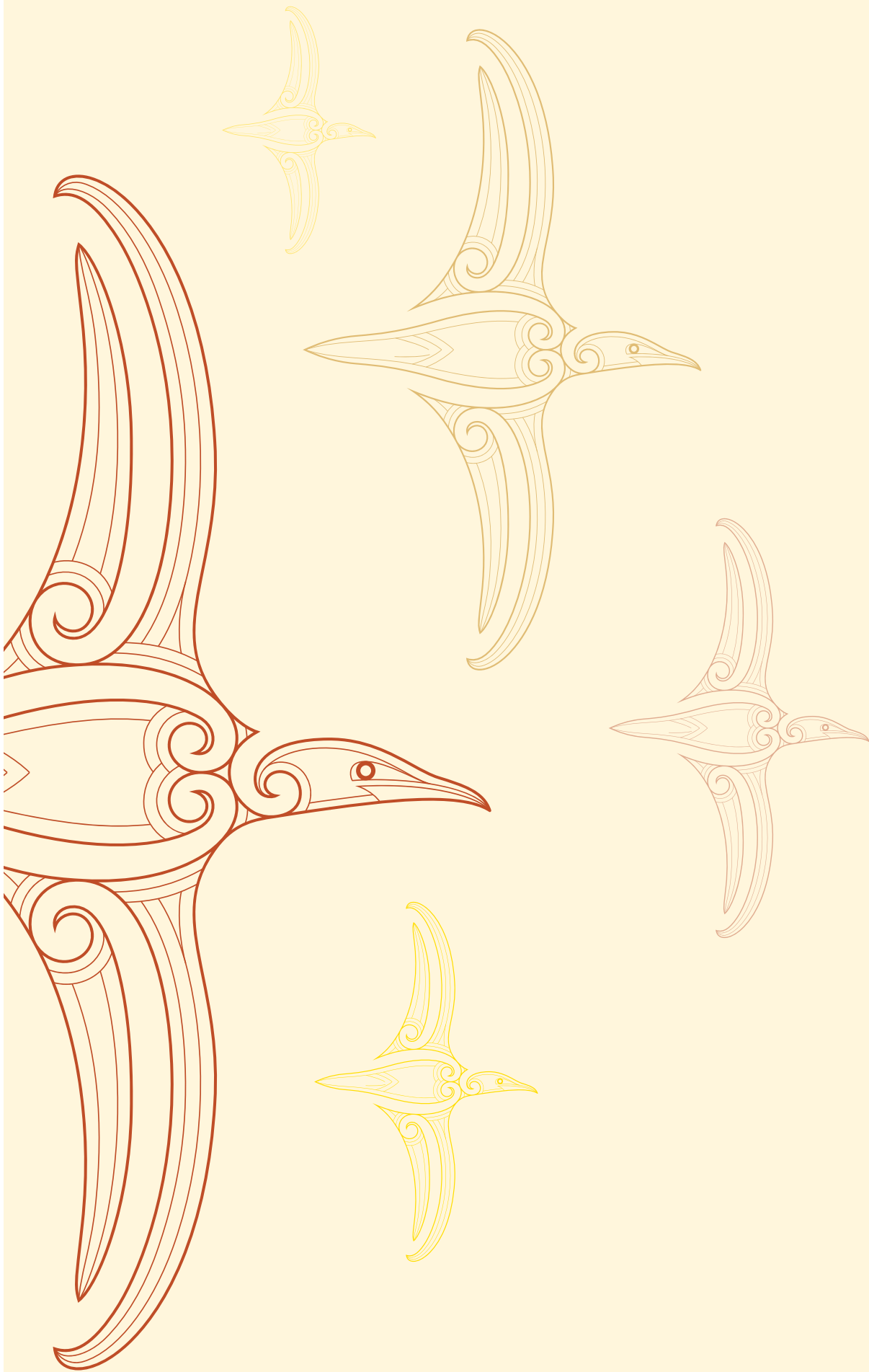
Our heartfelt thanks go to the parents, rangatahi and tamariki, and kaimahi who shared their experiences with us.



**Arran Jones**  
Chief Executive



**Nova Banaghan**  
Chief Monitor



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# About Return and Remain Home

Return and Remain Home is one of the placement or care types used by Oranga Tamariki, alongside whānau/family, non-kin, and residential care. The Oranga Tamariki description for return and remain home care is “arrangements where children are in the legal custody of the Chief Executive but return to or remain in the care of their immediate family (usually parents). These placements are most used where we are attempting to support the reunification of a family, while still maintaining legal custody”.<sup>1</sup>

As at 30 June 2022, 12 percent of tamariki and rangatahi in care (627 tamariki and rangatahi) were said to be living in this type of care situation.

Tamariki and rangatahi come in to care for many reasons. It may be because of serious abuse or neglect concerns, where tamariki or rangatahi are unsafe. It may be because a parent is not able to provide the parenting needed for a tamariki or rangatahi with high and/or complex needs.

Tamariki and rangatahi can go in to care with the parent’s consent, or Oranga Tamariki can apply to the Family Court for an interim custody order either advising or without advising the parents. The Family Court determines whether the custody application is warranted and either agrees or dismisses the application.<sup>2</sup>

Once the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki has custody they are responsible for the day-to-day care and needs of the tamariki or rangatahi. A custody order in favour of the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki means they can make decisions about where the tamariki lives (as well as other important decisions). While this order is in place, tamariki and rangatahi can be moved out of the home at any time.

On occasion a Judge will grant the custody order application on the condition tamariki remain in the care of their parents. Oranga Tamariki usually makes the decision as to the type of care situation the child will live in. If Oranga Tamariki determines the home is unsafe or the parent is unable to care for their tamariki they can place them with an approved caregiver who is either a whānau member or a non-kin caregiver.

1 [www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/About-us/Performance-and-monitoring/safety-of-children-in-care/2021-22/OT-Safety-In-Care-2022.pdf](http://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/About-us/Performance-and-monitoring/safety-of-children-in-care/2021-22/OT-Safety-In-Care-2022.pdf) Page 6

2 [www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/children-in-our-care/when-does-a-child-go-into-care](http://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/children-in-our-care/when-does-a-child-go-into-care)

If tamariki or rangatahi are placed out of the care of their parents, the goal is to return them home at the earliest opportunity – when it is assessed as safe, and the home environment can meet their needs. The decision to return tamariki or rangatahi home is a serious one and must be made after a careful and thorough assessment of the parent’s capacity and capability to provide the care that is needed.

Oranga Tamariki policy requires that an assessment has been made that it is safe for tamariki to return home. At times, rangatahi will choose to take themselves home – when this happens it is then up to the social worker to put a safety plan in place.

A return home usually occurs while the custody order is still in place. This review goes into the reasons why this is the case. The custody order ought to remain in place for the shortest possible time and discharge may occur within the regular Family Court reporting cycle (that is, within a six- or twelve-month period).

**Table 1: Tamariki in return and remain care and duration in this placement**

<b>As at March 2022</b>	<b>Return home placement</b>	<b>Remain home placement</b>
Number of tamariki/rangatahi (% of all in care)	386 (8%)	191 (4%)
Average duration in placement	13 months	24 months

In conducting this review, we were advised that a custody order is required to provide services and supports to parents and tamariki in this care situation. However, the *Oranga Tamariki Act (1989)* provides alternative options for these provisions<sup>3</sup>. Services and Support Orders can be made by a Family Court Judge requiring Oranga Tamariki to provide services to support the return home and to support safe care.

3 [www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0024/latest/whole.html#DLM150402](http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0024/latest/whole.html#DLM150402) s86 and s91



# Key findings

We heard a collective view across the care sector that tamariki need to be in the care of their whānau, preferably their parents. Kaimahi from Oranga Tamariki felt that, due to a practice shift within their agency, there was now a greater emphasis on keeping tamariki out of care and returning them to their parents where possible.

We also heard that for a return home to have the best chance of success, the transition needs to be done with care, planned well, and guided by best practice and the specific needs of tamariki and their parents.

When we consider that tamariki have entered care because of safety concerns, it is understandable that good support needs to be in place when they return or remain at home. This need is underlined by the Oranga Tamariki *Safety of Children in Care Report*, which notes that of all children in care, tamariki that return or remain home are at the greatest risk of harm. Parents need sufficient financial, practical, or educative assistance to support the return home.<sup>4</sup>

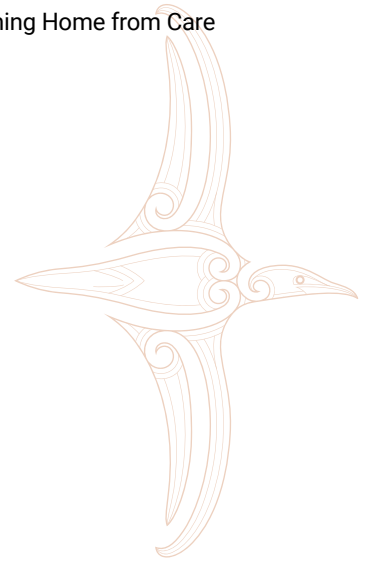
Our report finds that, despite an increased focus by Oranga Tamariki on returning tamariki home, policies, practices and sufficient support from across the social sector are not yet in place.

In reviewing Oranga Tamariki data, and listening to the voices of tamariki and rangatahi, whānau, and agency kaimahi, several clear themes emerged:

- Oranga Tamariki social workers do not have clear guidance on when custody orders are removed, or when less coercive powers are preferred, and this lack of guidance is reflected in regional variations in the duration that orders remain in place.
- Oranga Tamariki data on the success of tamariki returning or remaining home is limited, and this reduces opportunities for Oranga Tamariki to understand what is working well and where there are areas of risk.

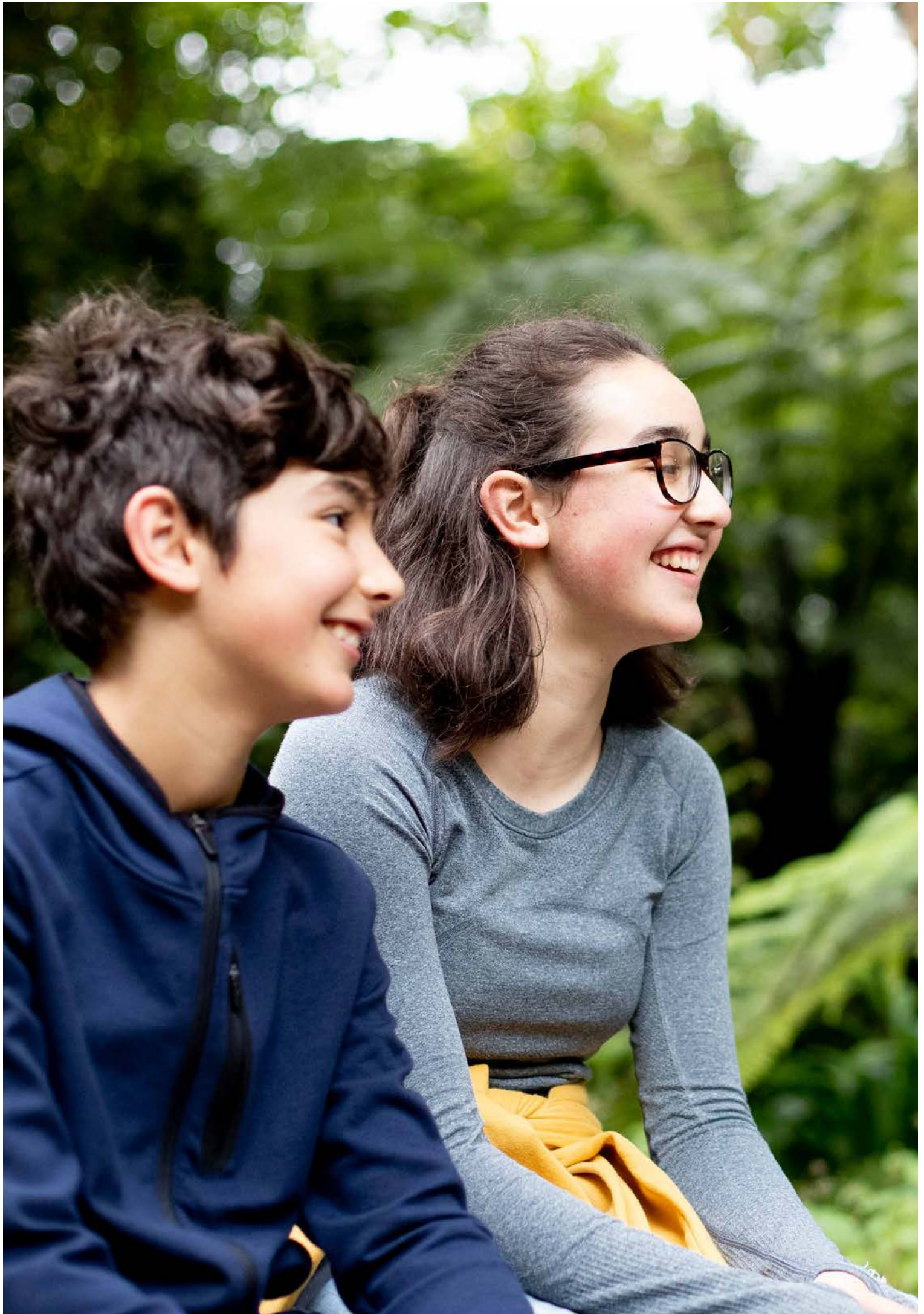
4 [www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/About-us/Performance-and-monitoring/safety-of-children-in-care/2019-20/Safety-of-Children-in-Care-Annual-Report-2020.pdf](http://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/About-us/Performance-and-monitoring/safety-of-children-in-care/2019-20/Safety-of-Children-in-Care-Annual-Report-2020.pdf)





- Planning is important to the success of a return home, however Oranga Tamariki data shows that almost half are unplanned.
- While policy recommends that tamariki returned home are visited every week for the first four weeks, data from Oranga Tamariki for 2021/2022 showed that only 19 percent of children who returned home were visited weekly for the first month after the transition<sup>5</sup>. Unplanned returns home were also visited less frequently in the first four weeks, than planned returns (75 percent of planned returns received at least one visit in the first four weeks, compared to 63 percent for unplanned).
- Support from the wider social sector for tamariki and rangatahi, and their whānau was varied, with communication, collaboration and funding raised as barriers to success. For example, long waiting lists for assessments and specialised support for parents, such as alcohol and drug counselling, and for tamariki, such as mental health or disability assessments, have an impact on parents and tamariki returning home or waiting to return home.
- Inconsistent government policies and practice was identified as a barrier to a successful return home. We heard about uncoordinated policy and practice between Oranga Tamariki and Kāinga Ora in particular, which lead to delays in parents receiving the right support or in accessing a suitable, stable home so their children can return.

5 Oranga Tamariki told us that, following our initial findings, it updated its guidance to align with its approach of a needs-based frequency of visits. The *'monitoring and reviewing after the return home'* guidance now states that visiting frequency should be based on the assessed needs of the child or young person.





# Methodology

The stories and voices of tamariki and rangatahi, and their whānau, caregivers and communities are at the centre of our monitoring approach. Effective and meaningful monitoring requires a mix of approaches and the use of quantitative (numbers) data and qualitative (experiences) information.

For the purposes of this review, we focused our community engagement on people with direct experience of return and remain home care. This included tamariki and rangatahi, and their parents.

## Who we spoke with

In September and October 2022, we met with 109 people who receive or provide services in the return/remain home space.



**16 TAMARIKI  
& RANGATAHI**



**9 PARENTS**



**78 STAFF OF  
ORANGA TAMARIKI**



**9 NON-GOVERNMENT  
ORGANISATION  
REPRESENTATIVES**

We spoke with kaimahi from Oranga Tamariki, Open Home Foundation, Barnardos, Methodist Mission and Kia Puāwai (formerly Youth Horizons Trust), as well as kaimahi from Mokopuna Ora, based at an Oranga Tamariki site. These agencies were identified by Oranga Tamariki due to the support they provide whānau who have tamariki returning home.

We visited a mix of urban and rural locations across the Waikato and in Ōtautahi (Christchurch). We also spoke with kaimahi from Oranga Tamariki National Office.

The data included in this report is from our annual data request to Oranga Tamariki.





# Introduction

In determining the topic of this first focused review we considered themes uncovered through our monitoring work, including:

- our early reports on Agency Compliance with National Care Standards (NCS) Regulations 69 and 85 (which concern allegations of abuse and neglect against tamariki in care)
- the voices of tamariki who have returned home
- the findings of the Oranga Tamariki *Safety of Children in Care* reports.

Our 2021/2022 *Experiences of Care in Aotearoa* report<sup>6</sup> captured the experiences of some parents who had tamariki in care returning home. The varied experiences shared with us suggested that there were areas regarding support for parents caring for their own children who remain in the custody of Oranga Tamariki that required further exploration.

For example, we heard that tamariki had been returned home on short notice because other placements had 'broken down' and Oranga Tamariki needed a temporary placement.

*"They [Oranga Tamariki] asked if I could look after her for a whole week. [...] Then they ring me, say there's a new caregiver, you need to drop her here, we will pick her up and take her away. No one looked back [to when she was with me] and said things are going well, they say nup, she's going Home for Life. [...] It was a big effect, she said to me, 'why am I leaving, why am I going to them, I'm home with you'. I said, 'they [Oranga Tamariki] have said this is how it needs to be.' [...] I was gutted, absolutely gutted. I thought yay, they were going to give me a chance."*

In other instances, we were told that parents were considered safe options for some tamariki but not all.

*"If I am a safe mother, and because the court say I am safe [for my other children], why can't I have my girls return?"*

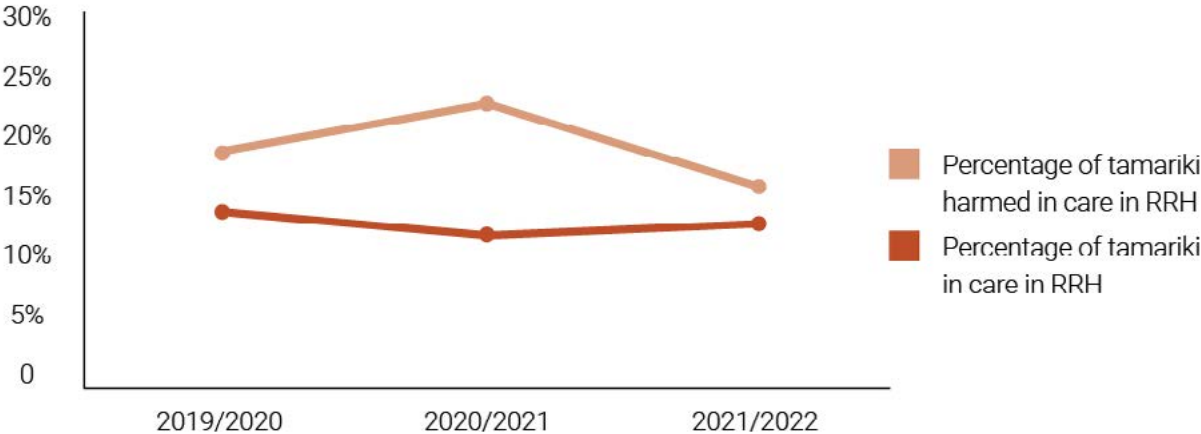
6 [aoturuki.govt.nz/reports/experiences-of-care-in-aotearoa-2021-2022](https://aoturuki.govt.nz/reports/experiences-of-care-in-aotearoa-2021-2022)

We also heard positive experiences where parents were provided with a range of supports and the transition happened in a planned way.

*“When the new social worker came along, she promised that she will return our son to us. She explained the process. She gave us a time frame and told us what we needed to do and guided us. She helped us, she worked with us within the time frame.”*

Every year, Oranga Tamariki publish its *Safety of Children in Care* report, reporting on harm caused to tamariki and rangatahi in care. Over the last four years, these reports have shown the number of children harmed and the number of incidents of harm has largely remained unchanged. What these reports also tell us is that children harmed in return and remain home care are overrepresented, notwithstanding there has been a decrease in the 2021/2022 year (from 23 percent in 2020/2021 to 16 percent in 2021/2022).

**Graph 1: Tamariki in return remain home (RRH) placements as a proportion of care placements and as a proportion of all tamariki harmed in care**



The *Safety of Children in Care* report also acknowledges that tamariki and rangatahi in return and remain home care are “the highest risk group”, with “a higher area of proportional risk”, that “continues to be an area of risk”.<sup>7</sup> Unlike other care settings, tamariki are either remaining in or returning to a care arrangement where there have previously been substantiated care and protection concerns. This identified vulnerability is a key factor in deciding to undertake this review.

<sup>7</sup> [www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/About-us/Performance-and-monitoring/safety-of-children-in-care/2019-20/Safety-of-Children-in-Care-Annual-Report-2020.pdf](http://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/About-us/Performance-and-monitoring/safety-of-children-in-care/2019-20/Safety-of-Children-in-Care-Annual-Report-2020.pdf)

The 2020/2021 *Safety of Children in Care* report noted that where harm was found:

*“There was a need for more sustained robust safety planning, with supports in place to progress change in adult behaviours in the household or in overseeing the on-going safety and well-being of children and ensuring sustained change. Often the support for the return home placement dropped off or was not established in the first place, and the parent did not receive sufficient financial, practical, or educative assistance to support the social work plan for the child”.<sup>8</sup>*

Given the concerns raised in the Oranga Tamariki *Safety of Children in Care* reports, our observations from our own reports, and against a backdrop of Oranga Tamariki placing greater emphasis on returning tamariki home, we considered it important to take a closer look.

This report looks at what practice, policy and supports are wrapped around tamariki, rangatahi and their parents to ensure a safe return, or remain, home. We look at what works well, and what doesn't, to inform future returns home.

We were also interested in understanding more about why tamariki remain in the custody of Oranga Tamariki when it has been assessed as safe for them to be cared for by their parents. We also wanted to know how parents are supported to care for their children, and what their understanding is of the legal orders that enable Oranga Tamariki to make day-to-day decisions while trusting them to provide that day-to-day care.

Due to the small number of tamariki and rangatahi who remain home when a custody order has been granted to the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki, this report focuses on those who return home.

8 [www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/About-us/Performance-and-monitoring/safety-of-children-in-care/2020-21/SOCiC-AR-2021-FA.pdf](http://www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/About-us/Performance-and-monitoring/safety-of-children-in-care/2020-21/SOCiC-AR-2021-FA.pdf) Page 19



# A successful return home

This story draws on kōrero with one child within a sibling group, their parent, and their Oranga Tamariki social worker. It provides a description of a successful return home from each of these perspectives.

The māmā we spoke with told us about the relationship she has built with her social worker. She shared that this relationship was influenced by her social worker keeping her word, not judging her for past choices and being willing to support the whānau despite challenges that may arise.

*“We have been through thirteen [social workers] in all these years, but she is the best. One of the reasons I haven’t moved to [city] is coz I don’t want to shift [social worker]. What if I get someone who doesn’t have kids telling me what to do? Or those who look at you on paper and make a judgement. My [social worker] is the reason I don’t move”.*

The social worker acknowledged that the practice shift happening within Oranga Tamariki means mahi is much more “whānau focused” and told us that the result of this is greater partnership and trust. The social worker told us about the importance of building confidence within a whānau, walking alongside them so the parent can see that they can be successful.

*“Yeah, things are now very whānau focused, that’s where you get that partnership and build up that trust. If you’re properly working alongside whānau, then it [return home] works better”.*

We were told that the transition home was planned; Oranga Tamariki facilitated a hui-a-whānau that included māmā, pāpā and extended whānau. The whānau were supported to develop a return home plan, and we were told that the social worker had an approach that meant the plan was driven by the whānau and their unique needs.



*“For the plan I sat down with [social worker], her supervisor and whoever else from [ex partner’s family] and came up with a realistic plan that we decided together. This office makes the difference – a plan that is going to be successful is one that is made by you. A plan should roll itself out not be filled out with things you don’t need with a bus card thrown in.”*

The social worker told us about the importance of having plans in place around tamariki and how this prepares a whānau for the return. She also told us about the need for practical supports and resourcing the return home for tamariki.

This return home plan included a supported transition home for the tamariki, with their māmā initially providing their care with the support of another whānau member before moving to caring for her tamariki independently.

The plan also included on-going support for both the children and their māmā. During our kōrero, examples were provided of both practical and therapeutic supports. Māmā described receiving support from two services within the community. She also explained that her tamariki are being supported around their education and health needs.


This māmā described their social worker going above and beyond, transporting her tamariki to school and organising a resource worker for transport to appointments as the whānau are currently without alternative transport.

The social worker talked about the importance of having relationships across health, education and with the lawyer for child to ensure that they are aware of the plans and in support of these allowing for a smoother transition.

The tamariki spoke about the positive relationship between their māmā and the social worker and told us that they felt comfortable talking to her [social worker]. The child said their social worker ensured they had what they needed for school and how she *“helps with adult stuff too”*, telling us that their social worker helped their māmā with things she needed.

*“She’s really nice and helpful. I can talk to her about anything. I can tell her my feelings. She’s comforting.”*

During our kōrero, the social worker said that building trust and confidence with tamariki takes time due to the mistrust they may have toward Oranga Tamariki, but it was important that they knew they were being supported.



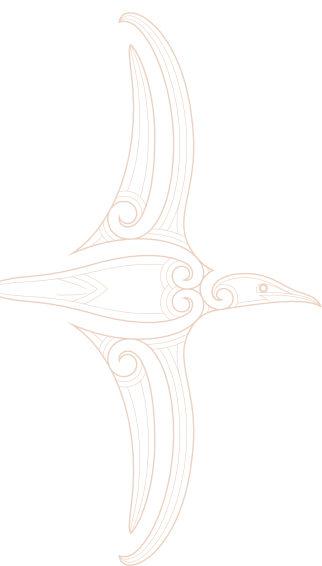
# Why do custody orders remain?

We wanted to know why tamariki and rangatahi have been returned home to their parent/s yet remain in the custody of the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki. On the face of it, if the home has been considered safe then why is the State still custodian? We did not get a clear answer.

Once tamariki are returned home, it is accepted that it can take time for care and protection orders to be discharged by the Family Court. However, considering the average duration that orders remain in place, this cannot be the main reason for why the State remains custodian.

From our interviews, it was evident there are many reasons why orders remain, including risk averse practice. However, we also found there is an absence of clear guidance for Oranga Tamariki social workers on when orders can be safely removed, and when alternative avenues for providing support are used.

Removing a child from their family and placing them in, and keeping them in, care involves the exercise of considerable power by the State. The lack of clarity we heard in preparing this report suggests the need to keep orders in place may not always be justified, and that less coercive powers could be utilised to support tamariki and their parents.



## Lack of guidance for Oranga Tamariki Social Workers

Oranga Tamariki data shows that the average duration for tamariki in return home care ranges across Oranga Tamariki regions from eight to 18 months. The average duration for tamariki in remain home care ranges across Oranga Tamariki regions from 10 to 32 months. This is suggestive of an inconsistent approach to when custody orders are removed.

We asked Oranga Tamariki about the variation between regions and were told there is no specific guidance around making decisions to discharge custody.

Oranga Tamariki acknowledged that there are a number of policies about remain and return home that influence decision making. We heard this is because “there is no one size fits all” and a single policy cannot respond to the unique needs of every tamariki, their parents and whānau. We subsequently heard that “responsive planning around return home should account for specific situations.”

## Alternatives to providing support to tamariki and whānau

When meeting with Oranga Tamariki National Office to understand the rationale for orders remaining, we heard that “there are a lot of barriers to removing custody orders” for tamariki returning home and that this is not a straightforward process.

Oranga Tamariki advised that, at times, a custody order might be in place as part of a plan where tamariki can return safely to their parents, and at times this can be whānau driven as they have concerns for the safety of tamariki. For some tamariki who remain at home, we were told custody orders allow Oranga Tamariki to support the whānau and provide a level of support that wouldn't otherwise be available.

Oranga Tamariki National Office advised that, in some cases, there may still be safety concerns for the tamariki while living with their parent/s. Oranga Tamariki maintaining a custody order allows social workers to support the whānau and connect them with supports in the community until they can provide care without the need for a custody order.

However, Oranga Tamariki National Office kaimahi also acknowledged that access to funding and support should not be a reason to be in State custody, but in some instances is the only way that tamariki and their parents can access support. When asked about alternatives such as services and support orders and why these were not the default legal option, we were not provided with a clear rationale.

A Services Order can be made under Section 86 of the *Oranga Tamariki Act*. This commits Oranga Tamariki to provide resourcing for the services needed while the tamariki or rangatahi is at home with their parent/s. These services are set out in the plan submitted to the Family Court.

A Support Order can be made under Section 91 of the *Oranga Tamariki Act*. This enables formal social work involvement, with a focus on support and monitoring. It can be used when the care or protection of tamariki or rangatahi requires monitoring, and the whānau or family requires assistance to provide safe care.<sup>9</sup>

There is guidance on the Oranga Tamariki practice centre stating that Support Orders can avoid the need for a Custody Order and can be used where custody orders have been discharged, where further support and oversight is required.<sup>10</sup> However, it is unclear on when and how to apply this guidance.

The lack of clear guidance for Social Workers is likely to contribute to variations in practice, and why orders may remain when they are no longer required.

The consequence of keeping orders in place unnecessarily may increase the administrative burden on social workers, and a level of imposition on the lives of tamariki and their whānau that is no longer warranted.

## The role of the Family Court and Lawyer for the Child

Some Oranga Tamariki kaimahi expressed concerns that some lawyers representing the whānau and/or the tamariki did not take social workers' views into account when providing advice around tamariki care, with some lawyers *"stuck in the old ways, trying to keep children in our [Oranga Tamariki] care"*. Those kaimahi felt this could result in recommendations not being in the best interests of tamariki or whānau, especially where they felt the lawyer had spent little or no time with those they were representing.

*"Counsel [Lawyer] for child has too much power, they see tamariki once every year or every six months, then the Judge looks to them [to guide decision making] ... Half our kids [in care] don't know who their lawyer is when we use their names."*

*"I have issues with the Lawyer for Child, things can be difficult with Lawyer for Child. They're saying one thing and we are trying to uphold the decision of child and whānau. Then the Lawyer for Child is stone-walling the really big conversations that we are having. It's difficult to shift even from a Section 101 to Section 91, [let alone discharge custody]."*

<sup>9</sup> [practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/our-work/interventions/family-court-orders/types-of-court-orders/#support-orders](https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/our-work/interventions/family-court-orders/types-of-court-orders/#support-orders)

<sup>10</sup> [practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/our-work/interventions/family-court-orders/types-of-court-orders/#support-orders](https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/our-work/interventions/family-court-orders/types-of-court-orders/#support-orders)

When it comes to tamariki who remain in the home, we heard that sometimes the decision is made by the Family Court. Site leadership gave an example:

*“We have a situation where we applied for a Section 78 [Custody Order] and the Judge put in a condition that the tamariki remain with mum”.*

Oranga Tamariki kaimahi also had the perception that there was an element of risk aversion to releasing tamariki from their custodial order accompanied by a general distrust between the lawyers/courts and Oranga Tamariki kaimahi *“as to whether we will do what we say we are going to do”*. Kaimahi described it as *“tiring and draining”* when they had to have multiple consults with lawyers and judges to convince them tamariki could be returned home with adequate supports in place – *“it can be a grind”*.

Known difficulties in accessing support for families may also be contributing to risk averse practice and decision making.

## Conclusion

While a custody order can be a safety net for tamariki and rangatahi, it remains unclear as to when is the right time to remove an order and hand back responsibility for day-to-day decision making to the parents, or why less coercive powers aren't utilised more to support tamariki and their parents.



# Are policy and practices in place to support tamariki returning home safely?

While tamariki and rangatahi returning or remaining home while in the custody of Oranga Tamariki are only 12 percent of those in care, a figure that has been consistent since June 2020, we heard how the practice shift within Oranga Tamariki is to prioritise the return of tamariki and rangatahi back to their whānau rather than non-kin caregivers.

## Practice shift

Oranga Tamariki told us it is making a “*fundamental shift in its approach to practice*” and that “*at the heart of this shift is the relationships [it] builds with the tamariki, whānau, communities and partners they work with*”. We were told that “*practice will draw from Te Ao Māori knowledge, methods, and principles, which are by their nature relational, restorative and inclusive. This shift in practice will benefit all young people including tamariki and whānau Māori*”.<sup>11</sup>

It was the perception of Oranga Tamariki kaimahi we spoke with, that because of this shift, fewer tamariki are coming into care and more are being returned home to their parent/s.

However, many kaimahi told us they felt there was pressure to avoid bringing tamariki into care and to “*get them out of care*” meaning that, in some cases, “*we are placing children with whānau [including parents] that aren’t set up [to care for them]*”. They said the practice shift, although positive, did not acknowledge the amount of time and money that was needed to achieve a successful outcome in returning tamariki home and that the current level of supports available is not adequate.

Oranga Tamariki social workers also had concerns that the shift had put much of the risk back on to frontline staff. Their perception was that the shift in practice meant they were responsible for facilitating support for parents in an environment where financial resources and time are scarce, but for the return home to succeed the demands for these are high. Some told us the return home process could feel “KPI (Key Performance

<sup>11</sup> [aroturuki.govt.nz/reports/experiences-of-care-in-aotearoa-2021-2022](https://aroturuki.govt.nz/reports/experiences-of-care-in-aotearoa-2021-2022) Page 47

Indicator) driven” rather than focusing on the needs of individual whānau and tamariki.

Furthermore, Oranga Tamariki kaimahi said that their opinions did not seem listened to, yet ultimately those kaimahi believe that all the professional risk lay with them.

*“Social worker voices are not being heard, psychologists and lawyers’ voices are heard above social worker voices in the courts. We see it in education where educational psychologist voices are heard. Social worker voices are not heard as a profession.”*

*“For a successful return, we [social workers] need to hold a lot of risk.”*

If the practice shift is to be successful, and if tamariki and rangatahi are to be returned home safely, it is important that Oranga Tamariki social workers have the right policies, tools and resources available to support the transition.

In talking to Oranga Tamariki kaimahi, tamariki, rangatahi and whānau, and looking at data supplied by Oranga Tamariki, we understand:

- policy and practice guidelines are not clear, and there is a lack of alignment between policy and practice
- nearly half of transitions home are unplanned
- nineteen percent of children who returned home were visited weekly for the first four weeks of the return home
- relationships between tamariki and whānau are important and for the most part, we heard about positive relationships.

When we asked Oranga Tamariki if they could tell us about the numbers of tamariki that are subsequently removed from their parents, Oranga Tamariki advised that “due to the complexity of the data”, an analysis of re-entry to care numbers for tamariki that were returned or remained home could not be provided. Information about re-entry is critical for Oranga Tamariki to understand the success of return/remain home care, as well as understanding areas of risk. As noted previously in our *Experiences of Care in Aotearoa 2021–22 Report*<sup>12</sup>, Oranga Tamariki committed to improving its data systems, and it is hoped that this information is available in future.

12 [aroturuki.govt.nz/reports/experiences-of-care-in-aotearoa-2021-2022](https://aroturuki.govt.nz/reports/experiences-of-care-in-aotearoa-2021-2022) Page 29

## Policies that support returning tamariki and rangatahi home

Assessing safety needs is a key requirement of the NCS Regulations, which place a legal obligation on the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki to, amongst other matters, ensure a process is conducted that:

- a. identifies the risk of harm to the child or young person or to other persons by the child or young person
- b. Considers the following:
  - i. the nature of the harm, loss, or injury that the child or young person may have experienced, and the effect this may have on the child's or young person's ongoing safety or well-being
  - ii. the risks of harm posed by other persons who come into, or may come into, contact with the child or young person
  - iii. the nature of the child's or young person's level of resilience and any protective factors present in the child's or young person's environment
  - iv. aspects of the child's or young person's behaviour that may present a risk of harm, and the impact this may have on their own safety or the safety of others.<sup>13</sup>

The Oranga Tamariki Practice Centre has multiple policies and guidance for social workers relevant to return/remain home.

- The *Returning children and young people safely home*<sup>14</sup> policy outlines steps needed to take both before and after tamariki and/or rangatahi are placed back in the care of the parents.
- *Transitions within care*<sup>15</sup> and *When tamariki and rangatahi move between care arrangements*<sup>16</sup> also provide policy information to inform decision making for tamariki transitioning out of care.
- Assessments are to be guided by the *Tuituia assessment framework* in a 13-part report completed by the social worker.<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, social workers are reliant on various pieces of policy to guide their decision making when returning tamariki safely home.

13 National Care Standards Regulations, Regulation 14

14 [practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/previous-practice-centre/policy/caring-for-children-and-young-people/key-information/returning-mokopuna-safely-home](https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/previous-practice-centre/policy/caring-for-children-and-young-people/key-information/returning-mokopuna-safely-home)

15 [practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/policy/transitions-within-care/#updates-made-to-this-policy](https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/policy/transitions-within-care/#updates-made-to-this-policy)

16 [practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/our-work/care/transitioning-between-placements-or-out-of-care/when-tamariki-and-rangatahi-move-between-care-arrangements](https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/our-work/care/transitioning-between-placements-or-out-of-care/when-tamariki-and-rangatahi-move-between-care-arrangements)

17 [practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/core-practice/practice-tools/the-tuituia-framework-and-tools/the-tuituia-framework-and-domains](https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/core-practice/practice-tools/the-tuituia-framework-and-tools/the-tuituia-framework-and-domains)



Oranga Tamariki site leadership and frontline kaimahi described a lack of alignment between policy and practice guidelines, and the reality of what can be delivered in supporting transitions home.

*"[The current policy] is not fit for purpose. We have not got the infrastructure we need to be out there, and we know it is not going well."*

It was evident in our conversations with Oranga Tamariki kaimahi that the use of professional judgement often superseded policy and guidance when it came to decisions related to returning tamariki home. The need for social workers to do this in the absence of clear guidance has the potential for increased risk for unsafe practice when considered within the context of kaimahi telling us they feel they carry the risk of decision making more than other professionals, and that at times their views were held as less valuable than other professionals.

What is evident from our engagements with both frontline kaimahi and National Office there is a divide between what is happening at the frontline and what National Office perceive to be happening.

## Internal processes within Oranga Tamariki can be a barrier

On some occasions, returning to the care of a parent means changing geographical location. This generally means a change of Oranga Tamariki site and therefore social worker.

Oranga Tamariki kaimahi told us about a lack of consistency in how different sites manage the return and remain home process and how this could affect the success of a return home, where the tamariki has been transferred between Oranga Tamariki sites.

However, we heard that overall, site transfers were positive, but also acknowledgment that *"for the organisation, it's a massive opportunity for poor practice to occur"*. Some examples were given where Oranga Tamariki social workers had felt other sites had *"dumped"* cases on them and just walked away because they had run out of options at their site.

*"It [transfers] has been [a] dump and run. One from up North, there has been no whānau researching. We had already said mum [as a placement] will not work, and all they did was throw it in our face. They transferred it anyway. You've got five days to accept it, the other sites will just transfer and put it on our queue, so we've got no choice to accept it. And it's like holy shit! It creates a huge issue. And our social workers are left to create a plan from scratch. What's best for the kid?"*

We heard that receiving tamariki without a proper handover and communication from the referring site makes it difficult to know what the parents and tamariki need as there is no relationship or trust. Kaimahi told us this felt like having to “*start from scratch*”.

We also heard examples of the transferring site handing over cases with large financial requests, saying that “*this is what we have agreed to, and what the family expects*” without discussion or consultation with the receiving site; this left them in the position where their first contact with the referred parent/s may be to say they cannot meet those expectations due to budget constraints.

“*I think that many of the tamariki go home to unsafe homes ... some sites look over the home environment or the family and because there is nowhere else to go, [so] they put kids back in the home.*”

However, overall, kaimahi said it seemed poor transfers were becoming “far less common” because Site Managers had become more focused on ensuring good practice within and between sites and were generally “on the same page”.

## **Planned transitions home have the best chance of success**

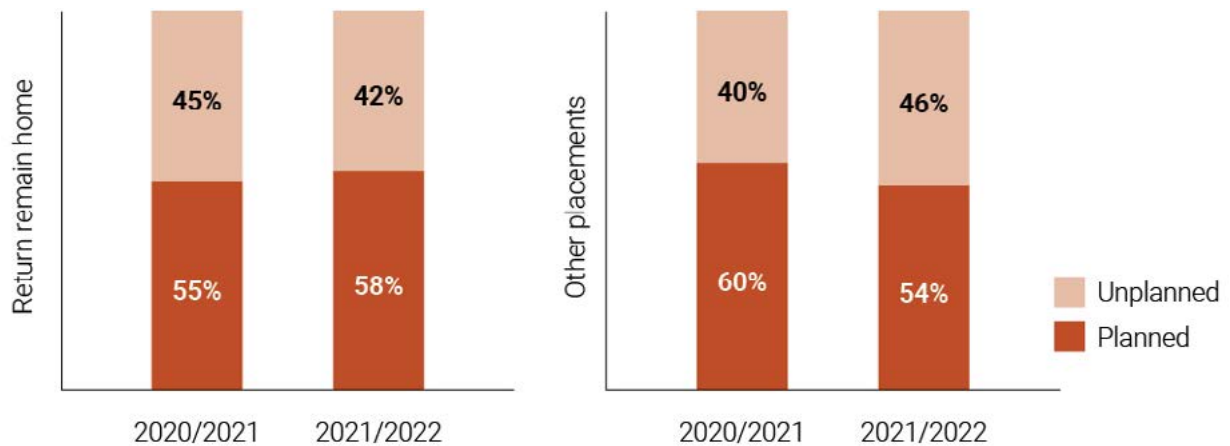
Tamariki told us they were happy to be home, and because of being returned home, felt that they had been listened to by their social workers. One rangatahi we spoke with shared that he had little say in the planning around his return home but wanted this to happen and was happy that it had. For the tamariki we spoke to, being home was the most important part of the transition and being involved in the planning was not a focus for them. For example, one tamariki told us: “*I’m just happy to be with my Mum. And the dogs*”.

This was supported by one parent who shared that their rangatahi did not care if they had any input in a return home plan as “*they were just happy to be home*”.

However, what we heard from both parents and agency kaimahi was when a transition was planned, it had a greater chance of success for the tamariki.

Oranga Tamariki data shows that nearly half of transitions home are unplanned. This has not materially improved in the past two years.

Graph 2: Planned and unplanned transitions in care



We asked Oranga Tamariki if it could provide any additional information about planning for return and remain home care. Oranga Tamariki provided analysis of 72 case files from 2021/22. Of the 72 case files, 42 were planned returns home. The analysis showed that of those 42 planned cases:

- there was evidence that a planning meeting took place in advance of the return home in 90 percent of planned cases, and
- in almost 80 percent of those meetings tamariki were consulted or participated, and all the meetings evidenced family/whānau consultation or engagement.

What this sample tells us, is that where planning occurs, tamariki and whānau are consulted to some extent. However, the sample also shows that 42 percent of the returns are unplanned.

Some kaimahi said that often an unplanned return home will result from rangatahi “voting with their feet” and there was little time for making comprehensive plans. Instead, processes became “reactive” with the safety of rangatahi the focus. In these situations, it is acknowledged that if a rangatahi is choosing to return to the care of their parent/s and are placing themselves at risk by running away, then at times the only option is for Oranga Tamariki to put a safety plan in place to mitigate any potential risk.

*“We might have a 16-year-old who says, I don’t want to be with my whānau caregivers/non-kin caregivers, and they abscond, runaway, whatever, back with their parents. And we’re doing the [return home] process on the backfoot. Trying to stay to that process, but retrospectively.”*

*“It is so hard to find the supports for these return remain home kids. And the ones that return home on their own is more difficult, the ones that vote with their feet.”*

Many of the Oranga Tamariki social workers and community partner kaimahi we spoke with told us that planning is the key to a successful transition back home and that these plans had to include the input and wishes of whānau and tamariki to know how best to support them.

*“We need to be part of the plan, but not the instigator of it. You have to be an active participant [to keep the plan moving forward but you can’t be driving it] ... Listening to tamaiti and whānau.”*

They said it was also important to acknowledge that whānau and tamariki needs could change, which required a solid relationship and foundation of trust to address “all the issues with the whānau and making sure that you are aware of the shifts and changes they are making”.

The consequences of limited planning were evident in our kōrero with tamariki. Tamariki told us that their social workers may have asked them what they would like to happen but did not always communicate the outcome with them if something had changed.

Some tamariki also spoke about not being aware of the plan around their return home. One rangatahi we spoke with shared that they were asked by their social worker what they wanted and when this was not the outcome, they were not aware of what the next steps were going to be for them. Another rangatahi said, “it just kind of happened”, when asked if there was a plan around their transition back to dad.

One child spoke about how they understood that there was going to be a whānau hui to decide where they and their sibling were going to live. This child had shared their views with their social worker and understood that these would be shared with the adults at the hui.

*“[Social worker asked me] if I want to live at [whānau caregiver’s house] and I said yes and now I live here [with parent], and [social worker] didn’t let me make the decision. It’s because [social worker] was going to have a big meeting [to plan] with the adults and then [social worker] didn’t. Then I went to live with mum it was a whole different story. [Whānau caregiver] was being sad, she said just go, if you’re going to live with her anyway just go. I wanted them [the adults] to have the meeting.”*

Most parents told us that there was limited planning before the transition home happened. Others shared that they were not ready to have their tamariki return to their care when the decision was made. There was limited information from parents to suggest that the transition home for their tamariki was happening in a planned way, and many of their experiences reflected the reality that the return home for tamariki is often unplanned.

One māāmā shared with us that neither her or her rangatahi, nor the social worker were aware of his return home and that the decision had been made by “*someone higher up*” within Oranga Tamariki. She reported that her rangatahi understood that he was in the home for a visit and was then told that he would not be returning to his previous placement.

***“No one knew until the night before. He was meant to be coming here for a visit for his birthday... he got told that night before his visit that he was coming permanently because it was the best place [for him].”***

Another parent told us that they were not prepared for their tamariki to return so quickly, without time for planning.

***“Part of me knew that I wasn’t prepared, and I found it overwhelming”.***

Without adequate planning, there is also no opportunity for the needs of the wider whānau to be considered. In the absence of planning, one whānau member shared: “*I went into it blind, then when he came back there was no support*”.

According to some Oranga Tamariki kaimahi we spoke with, they believe unplanned transitions<sup>18</sup> resulting from a lack of care options are happening more often. They told us that there were fewer caregivers willing to take on tamariki with high needs and/or behavioural challenges, but often, these are the tamariki that are coming into care. In some cases, kaimahi said the parents told them they were not ready or able to have tamariki home but were given no choice and then often the transition “*will fail and the tamariki will end up back in our care*”.

***“The plan for [rangatahi] was going from [one] placement to [agency] caregivers, 10 days later the placement had dissolved. We have nothing else, we have nowhere else, so he was sent home without wrapping supports around mum. We were screwing over [rangatahi] again, we had no placement for him.”***

Some parents perceived that Oranga Tamariki kaimahi made the decision to return their tamariki home due to having limited, or no other options for them. One parent spoke about being told at the beginning of an emergency meeting with Oranga Tamariki not to expect their child back for another six months, however as the meeting progressed and they raised concerns about the current care, it became evident there were no other options for their child. Oranga Tamariki agreed for the child to return home that same afternoon.

***“I think Oranga Tamariki didn’t have anywhere else for her to go so by the end of the emergency meeting they agreed that she could come home”.***

<sup>18</sup> Oranga Tamariki asked us to note that when they refer to an ‘unplanned transition’ they mean a situation where a more urgent transition is required, where there is not an opportunity to plan before the transition took place.

Kaimahi from Open Home Foundation said that they were sometimes told a parental assessment was no longer needed because tamariki had already been placed back home “because we have nowhere to put them”.

## Visits

The *Returning children and young people safely home* policy<sup>19</sup> outlines the need to visit often and recommends weekly visits for the first four weeks.

Data from Oranga Tamariki case file analysis for 2021/2022 showed that only 19 percent of children who returned home were visited weekly for the first month after the transition. This was confirmed by our conversations with tamariki, where some tamariki told us that they had little contact with their social worker after returning home.

Oranga Tamariki, through its case file analysis was able to say that tamariki were visited less often where the return home was unplanned.

- Where there was a planned return home, 75 per cent were visited at least once in the first four weeks.
- For those with an unplanned return home, 63 per cent were visited at least once in the first four weeks.

Beyond the first four weeks, case file analysis found that in 72 percent of cases, there was evidence of regular engagement (which could include visits) with a social worker over the twelve months that they reviewed. Oranga Tamariki described regular as “a frequency set out in their assessment/plan or at least eight weekly where no frequency had been set out”.

We asked Oranga Tamariki why visits weren’t made more frequently, particularly in view of their own understanding that tamariki and rangatahi in return and remain home care are “the highest risk group”, with “a higher area of proportional risk”, that “continues to be an area of risk”<sup>20</sup>. Oranga Tamariki told us this was for a range of reasons including:

- capacity restraints (through unplanned illness)
- familiarisation with the policy requirements
- some challenges in across-site working where tamariki return home to an area managed by a different site location
- resistance from older rangatahi to be visited as they had chosen to leave care or they saw the return home as the end of the care journey, and struggled to understand why visits were required.

19 Oranga Tamariki told us it updated guidance to align with the approach of a needs-based frequency of visits. The ‘monitoring and reviewing after the return home’ guidance now states that visiting frequency should be based on the assessed needs of the child or young person.

20 Oranga Tamariki Safety of Children in Care Report July 2021 – June 2022.

Oranga Tamariki noted that although their social workers may not be visiting the home, community partners and other professionals may be providing support to the whānau, however it did not have data to know to what extent this may be happening. Oranga Tamariki National Office also advised there was a sense that visits were seen as intrusive at a time when tamariki were trying to reconnect with their whānau.

Kaimahi told us about needing to strike a balance between policy and the needs of the tamariki and their parents. Some kaimahi told us that for younger tamariki the need to assess safety following the return home is essential and that they could use their judgement to assess the frequency of visits for older rangatahi.

*“The purpose is safety, to check if child is safe, they are high risk at that time. It’s about sighting the child. But for older children it is more about ticking our box, it’s [the policy] not meeting the needs of the child”.*

*“Those four weekly visits, that four weeks is the honeymoon period. That’s not when the family need those supports. If we are looking at the older kids, it will be the easier time”.*

We asked Oranga Tamariki whether, in the absence of regular visits from their social workers, there were other agencies that could be supporting the family at this time and providing a safety check. They were unable to see this in their systems but noted that in some cases this could be happening.

Following a briefing on the initial findings of this report, Oranga Tamariki advised that it updated its guidance to align with the approach of a needs-based frequency of visits. The *Monitoring and reviewing after the return home* guidance now states that visiting frequency should be based on the assessed needs of the child or young person.

While there is a need to strike a balance between the needs of tamariki and their parents, as noted in the *Safety of Children in Care* reports, a return home is an area of increased risk. Visiting tamariki is a way of not only reducing this risk, but also helps understand what help tamariki and the parents may need to support a successful return home.

## Relationships with social workers

For the most part, tamariki described positive relationships with their social workers and felt that they had their voices listened to in the process of returning home.

*"She's really nice and helpful. I can talk to her about anything. I can tell her my feelings. She's comforting".*

However, many tamariki also spoke about having little contact with their social workers once they had returned home and shared that their social worker would not be someone that they would reach out to for support, often naming their parents or other whānau members as people that they would seek support from. When asked if their social worker visited them when they returned home, one rangatahi said "Yes, sometimes, I forget his name. I didn't see him as much as the other ones".

Some tamariki also described relationships with Oranga Tamariki kaimahi that were impacted by limited trust. One tamariki told us that they did not feel listened to by their social worker, and this meant they lost hope in the return home process.

*"I didn't feel comfortable talking to her [social worker]. I didn't trust her. I don't want to talk to anyone. I know how to deal with my own problems and don't need someone telling me what to do."*

Parents told us that they are impacted by what they perceive as staff turnover or changes in social workers who support them. Our *Experiences of Care in Aotearoa* report showed that there has been an increase in turnover of frontline staff from eight percent in 2020/2021 to 10 percent in 2021/2022.

Many parents we spoke with shared they had numerous social workers throughout their involvement with Oranga Tamariki. Parents told us that this often meant they had to retell their story, and the frequent changes impacted their ability to make progress.

*"There has been lots of changes, five or six [social workers] in two years... I didn't like it, it's quite annoying when you have to explain stuff again and get the ball rolling again – because some are better than others and some don't do anything."*

*"We kept getting different people, they [Oranga Tamariki] didn't know who the social worker was even was when I rang them. You make progress and then get a new person."*

The quality of the relationship parents have with Oranga Tamariki kaimahi has the potential to impact how involved they are in decision making about their tamariki. Many parents shared they were not listened to by social workers and that their voices were not taken into consideration during planning.



One māmā described being “at the whim of Oranga Tamariki” and described a power imbalance in the relationship where the social worker “held the fact that [tamariki] was out of my care over me. The first [social worker] didn’t listen and everything I said was twisted”.

Other parents spoke about having a positive relationship with their Oranga Tamariki social worker. Parents described a positive relationship as one where communication was straightforward, there was an equal distribution of power, and the needs of their tamariki were met, including cultural needs.

*“I speak to her all the time. I can ring her and ask her stuff. She is very easy to communicate with and she responds well to things.”*

*“The current social worker is really awesome, she goes all out for the children. She’s a Pākehā lady but has a great understanding of te ao Māori... [She is our seventh social worker in four years]. I have got along with all of them, I have connected and engaged with all of them, it was all equal. I wanted it to be that way with the kids coming back.”*

One māmā told us that their social worker “has always followed through with what she said” and this has contributed to the trusting relationship between Oranga Tamariki and the whānau. Parents also spoke about the positive difference a good social worker can make for their tamariki.

*“The social worker we had before [current social worker] was awesome. That was a huge factor in supporting and making sure we had all the right tools – making sure [rangatahi] had everything he needed [ready for the return home].”*

Some parents shared that there were social workers who were trying to make things better for them and their tamariki. While parents shared that they were not listened to and had experiences of negative relationships with Oranga Tamariki kaimahi in the past, there was an acknowledgement that things were better than they had previously been.

*“I raised my concerns from the past and she [social worker] said she can’t do anything about it, but she said she wants to make things better this time around. And it has been, she takes everything into consideration, she doesn’t just expect me to drop everything and run around.”*

Oranga Tamariki social workers told us that one significant barrier to parents getting support is their fear of speaking up to get help because they are afraid their tamariki will be removed from their care again.

*"Whānau don't want to show any weakness, they are so fearful that they will take my kids again, so they are careful with what they share [with social workers]."*

Some parents had their own history of having been in care, or have their own trauma histories, which kaimahi said could make it difficult for creating a trusting and honest relationship.

Oranga Tamariki kaimahi told us that having whānau buy-in, listening to their needs, and having services on the same page was *"half the battle"*.

We heard that parents' relationships with their Oranga Tamariki social workers are mixed. Where there is a positive relationship, there is high trust and greater access to services. Half spoke to us about challenges, particularly with communication and access to services.

Parents told us that their ability to seek support was impacted by their relationship with Oranga Tamariki. With the absence of trust, parents shared that they were scared to tell Oranga Tamariki what was happening, as they were worried about being perceived as struggling or had a fear that their tamariki would be removed from their care once again.

*"I don't ask for any help from anyone especially Oranga Tamariki. I don't want to give them the impression that I can't cope with the girls... I don't want them to think that they can take the girls off me because they think I am incapable".*

Some parents told us that their ability to trust their social worker had been made difficult by allegations that had been made in the past. Parents were aware if a social worker has a negative view of them and told us that the relationship is negatively affected when they feel animosity from the social worker. One parent told us that they did not feel listened to by the social worker *"because the social worker didn't like me"*.

*"I don't trust them because of all the stuff we have been through. All the allegations, the stuff that I wasn't fit enough to have my kids".*

*"I tried to talk to OT, I even had my boss, counsellor and support person try to talk to meet with OT to tell them I was doing ok and could look after my kids. I made a hui for [OT social worker] to attend but she refused to come and meet with me and my boss and everyone. They didn't want to meet with me or hear me out. I was already considered bad and not good enough".*


Other parents shared that communication also impacted on their relationship with their social worker, with some saying they often relied on their lawyers or the lawyers for their children to get information about what was happening.

*“Sometimes she’s really hard to get a hold of and then when you do, she says she will do things but doesn’t do them. It’s slack. She’s very apologetic all the time, she says her hands are tied and nothing can be done.”*

Some parents shared other factors that affect their relationship with Oranga Tamariki. One māmā told us that her social worker did not understand the challenges associated with being a parent and that this was unhelpful to their situation.

*“My first Oranga Tamariki worker was terrible. She was not a parent herself and was unable to give good advice to me about the girls, nor was she able to understand what being a parent was like. I found her unhelpful and distrusting of me.”*

When there was collaboration and effective communication between all parties, including tamariki and parents, in relation to legal care decisions, Oranga Tamariki kaimahi said they saw good outcomes for those who returned home.



# Is there support for tamariki and rangatahi, and their parent/s?

Overwhelmingly, we heard that parents were doing the best they could to care for their tamariki who have returned home, often with minimal support in place. We also heard some examples of Oranga Tamariki kaimahi going above and beyond to help tamariki returning home.

Considering that these are households where tamariki and rangatahi have previously been removed, often for safety concerns, it is critical that the right support is in place and that social workers are able to easily access support from other agencies. Having these supports in place increases the likelihood of the return being a success and importantly ensure tamariki and rangatahi remain safe. However, what we heard was that the level of support varied.

As already noted, many parents were in situations where they had not actively parented for some time and need support to build confidence to parent again. Oranga Tamariki kaimahi said it requires time to develop a relationship with the parent so they can “talk about the good and the bad” of their situation without feeling judged or like they are failing as a parent.

One māmā we spoke to shared the impact on her younger tamariki as a result of her rangatahi returning home without the support that they required, telling us that they were exposed to a lot of anger in the absence of support.

Some parents described that in the haste of their tamariki returning, they did not have the practical supports for their tamariki. One māmā shared that one of her rangatahi needs a bed and one has only recently received funding from Oranga Tamariki for a desk and drawers after months of being at home.

This same māmā shared with us that there had been a plan for on-going support for her rangatahi following their return home, which was not followed through. The whānau were told that there would be on-going support from the previous care provider and, following a meeting with Oranga Tamariki, their rangatahi was told there would be a transition worker, however nothing has come from this.

*"[We] haven't seen the transition worker since the [transition] meeting. There was someone else who was meant to help with licence, jobs, courses, but we haven't heard anything from them either [...] they [previous placement provider] were meant to stay on board but they dropped off too".*

Parents also told us that there were not services available for them or were simply told 'no' in response to a request for specific support to assist their tamariki in their return home. Parents shared that the return home was an adjustment for them and their tamariki and that as the whānau were adjusting, challenges were arising.

*"I asked OT for counselling for me and the kids. [Rangatahi] trauma was popping up and getting worse, my own trauma and ability to look after them was stressing me out and I needed help, so I asked for counsellors for us. Oranga Tamariki asked me to send quotes and when I did, they declined and said it was too expensive... They have declined my counselling, clinical psychologist, they gave me a support worker and I asked for a relationship counsellor and Oranga Tamariki wouldn't help me for what I needed. I was trying to do the research and find out what we needed and yet they just wanted quotes, but no decisions were made to allow me to have it".*

In contrast, we heard examples of what good support looks like for parents and their tamariki. One parent shared that they were provided support from Oranga Tamariki to engage with courses to help them meet the needs of their tamariki.

*"[Oranga Tamariki] helped with costs and [the courses] came out of a Family Group Conference – the things we had to do to be better parents. I did some extras and was happy to get new tools, learn strategies especially for [tamariki] as he can take quite a toll when you have to repeat yourself again and again".*

Another parent told us that they had been supported by their social worker to engage with parenting supports, a financial mentor and a transitional housing provider. They explained that Oranga Tamariki had supported them to connect with these services who would provide long-term support once Oranga Tamariki stepped away. They also shared that their social worker has supported the whānau by funding holiday programmes, camps, clothing and school uniforms for the tamariki.

*"While custody order is in place, [Oranga Tamariki are supporting me financially], but I am engaged with the [financial] mentor so that in the long term they can be helpful, the community centre that I'm connected with can be helpful [in supporting me]".*

*"[Current social worker] helped get [tamariki] into school which is good. Also helped us get him into MMA [mixed martial arts] with a membership as it was expensive. She helps with anything he needs."*

Oranga Tamariki kaimahi said that because of the difficulties in accessing support services for many whānau with tamariki returned home, they often felt the need to step in themselves and do mahi that was technically outside their role, but necessary in their eyes to ensure the success of the transition. They also said community agencies often went the extra mile for these families too, as everyone wants to see the best outcomes for tamariki.

*"For the younger one there is Open Home Foundation, petrol vouchers, food vouchers, transition worker. Open Home has been amazing. We have put so much in place. I'm doing so much that's not my role. I'm finding a four-bedroom house, I've got to help with WINZ."*

We heard the consequences of not providing adequate support for parents could be a breakdown in the return home or additional reports of concern that could see tamariki re-entering care. As previously noted, Oranga Tamariki was unable to provide us with how many tamariki re-enter care after being returned home to parents "due to the complexity of the data and the considerable work required to analyse it". As a result, we are unable to see whether inadequate support is resulting in a breakdown in care arrangements.

## Supports not in place

The Oranga Tamariki *Returning children and young people safely home policy*<sup>21</sup> states that social workers are to "ensure there are enduring systems of support" for tamariki returning home and their parents. On our visits, Oranga Tamariki kaimahi said it is difficult to implement the appropriate services and support due to current resourcing in the care sector.

The guidance *When tamariki and rangatahi move between care arrangements*<sup>22</sup> states the importance of including key people in planning and information sharing. We heard that collaboration between support services in the community and Oranga Tamariki influenced the success of a transition home. When there is poor collaboration and the right information is not shared between key parties, the impact of this is a lack of coordination to deliver support when it is needed.

21 [practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/previous-practice-centre/policy/caring-for-children-and-young-people/key-information/returning-mokopuna-safely-home](https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/previous-practice-centre/policy/caring-for-children-and-young-people/key-information/returning-mokopuna-safely-home)

22 [practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/our-work/care/transitioning-between-placements-or-out-of-care/when-tamariki-and-rangatahi-move-between-care-arrangements](https://practice.orangatamariki.govt.nz/our-work/care/transitioning-between-placements-or-out-of-care/when-tamariki-and-rangatahi-move-between-care-arrangements)

Some parents described a transition home where limited supports had been put in place for their tamariki, and in some cases they spoke of the need to find their own supports. One parent told us that she had engaged locally with a Kaupapa Māori organisation when she recognised she needed further support.

One Oranga Tamariki kaimahi described the supports community agencies offer and what their site focuses on for tamariki returning home:

*“Having an education routine. If that’s going to be an uphill struggle, looking at things like mentoring. Locally, we have a Kaupapa Māori service, a service with an education lens, parenting support inside or outside the home, IWS [Intensive Wraparound Service] disability package which can go in to support the return home that relies on cooperation with health and disability sector. We have a Youth Worker on site, often for the older rangatahi, who have voted with their feet [to return home]; it might even be a transition worker to just build resources around that young person to create a day-to-day routine for the young person.”*

Many of the tamariki we spoke with told us that their social workers listened to them and helped to organise the things they need. These were often practical items, such as clothing, school uniforms or stationery as opposed to on-going therapeutic supports.

*“[Social worker] got me a gym pass, she takes me clothes shopping.”*

*“[Social worker] got us some stuff for school when we needed it. She got us uniforms because they were very expensive.”*

Kaimahi from all agencies we engaged with told us that many services and supports are needed for tamariki returning home, and collaboration between those services is essential. They said all those services need to be “on the same waka” in their understanding of the whānau situation, with “no competing agendas”. Sometimes kaimahi said they could end up in “endless loops of hui” and when there is finally some progress, “someone leaves, something falls over and it ends up being that no-one actually does any mahi”.

We heard about the need for a dedicated service for transitions home that included post-transition support. Many of the parents and tamariki engaged with care services have high support needs, some come with their own history of trauma, or a mistrust towards Oranga Tamariki that could be a barrier for engagement; therefore, having an independent service to manage the return home process was suggested as an ideal solution.

*“We need a community agency that have a contract to provide intensive support for return home situations. We can refer to Family Start, but [there is] no one to refer to specifically with RRH cases. It might be looking like we can discharge, early, but there is so much involved. We need our community partners to help us, but because they aren’t specifically contracted, once it gets tricky, it just fails”.*

*“Support services are so hard to get in helping us to follow the plan. Like I said before, we need more services that can check on the whānau and tamariki once we step out of the space. We need them to pick up the continued work and that may be keeping the whānau connected to other services – like it would be good if there was a main navigator of services or coordinator to keep the whānau connected to all the things they need to continue functioning well”.*

*“We need a specialist return home partner. Because it’s a high-risk time for abuse in care. It needs a tonne of time; our system isn’t set up very well for the time it needs... If we had a wish list, or a target, a specialist return home partner would be ideal in terms of being experts in that mahi, fluent in whānau lead safety planning and working in partnership”.*

## Funding

Oranga Tamariki kaimahi identified that there have been changes in what funding can be accessed, resulting in services that were previously able to be funded no longer being an option.

Kaimahi said that, compared with previous years, there was limited access to funding for many of the supports that they could previously offer whānau. Turning to private services was financially out of reach for most whānau.

*“There is nothing out there. Services we can’t use now because of funding which we found useful in the past.”*

*“Anything over \$300 you have to get someone up top [Regional Office] to approve. It takes weeks and weeks sometimes to get support in place. A couple of years ago the message was whatever the whānau need, pay for it, get it done. But now it’s different. You have to have a really clear justification for why you want it and for how long.”*

Both Oranga Tamariki and community services kaimahi described being impacted by budget constraints, with one Oranga Tamariki site leader saying, *“community agencies are impacted worse than us, they are already running on the smell of an oily rag anyway.”*

Kaimahi from across the care sector said that funding shortfalls and a lack of resources had increased the size of waitlists and added to delays in getting assessments and support which impacts on parents with tamariki returning home.



One kaimahi from a non-government organisation (NGO) said many parents they work with required specialised support, such as alcohol and drug counselling. They told us that when parents reach out for support in overcoming addiction, that is when help needs to be provided, however waitlists meant this could not happen.

*“When whānau say they want help, there is nothing available, there are waitlists. They are putting up their hands and have to wait, we have nothing specialised for meth or having your kids with you while you recover from addiction.”*

Another NGO kaimahi said that their own organisation had a large waitlist, and this meant they were not always able to take on cases in a timeframe that matched when the whānau were seeking support.

*“We have a big waitlist... we have to ring them [referred whānau] down the line and see if they still want us... There are roughly 20 referrals waiting, some are there three to six months – way too long when services are needed right now.”*

Oranga Tamariki kaimahi said that sometimes when services were finally ready to see the parents or tamariki, parents would be told they are not in a stable home environment and can't be seen until they are; however, services had been requested to help stabilise tamariki returning home.

*“We need more funding. Some of these kids that are waiting to go home need some really full-on assessments but there are no services here that can provide those assessments, like mental health assessments. There are services but the wait list is huge and up to a year and half long.”*

One kaimahi described the difficulties and delays they were currently facing with one tamariki returning home:

*“There are a whole lot of players [who have asked for] a psychology assessment, a cultural assessment, they have layered all these things on before we can consider the return home. [With waitlists] it will take at least 12 months to get these things happening and 12 months to get back into court.”*

As a consequence of waitlists and funding barriers, some parents experienced their tamariki returning home quickly with no on-going practical or financial support in place.

In addition, Oranga Tamariki kaimahi described an inequity between the financial and additional supports caregivers are entitled to and what parents receive, for example, funded activities, and respite care. Many kaimahi from across the care sector told us that parents with tamariki returning home need wraparound services and additional support.

*“About 70 percent can be currently looking at return home and we can’t give them the support they need. We need dedicated contracts and social workers to work alongside the parents. They are our most at risk, why can’t they have the same support [as caregivers] for parents? The inequities around this are so obvious. The system needs changing if they want us to be successful getting tamariki home safely to their whānau and if we want whanau to be successful looking after their children.”*

*“Eighty percent of the time it’s [harm] in whānau care. Why did that happen? Was it because of a lack of support in the return home space? We invest a lot of money in non-kin caregivers when they are caring for children. We don’t provide that same level of resource when they go home – they are mum [or dad], they should just do it – that’s how it feels.”*

*“There is a PCSS [Permanent Caregiver Support Service] Plan, which allows the caregivers some level of financial security that is not available to parents. It’s weird but that’s just how it is. That’s when it’s hard, a non-kin carer can get swimming, piano, guitar, parents can’t meet those expectations [for their own tamariki].”*

Overall, we consistently heard that funding, and resulting waiting lists, make it difficult to get the right support in place for tamariki and their whānau.

## **Inconsistent policies and practice between government agencies**

We heard from both parents and kaimahi of agencies with custody and care responsibilities, that inconsistent policies and practice across government agencies is a barrier to a successful return home. The comments from kaimahi also present as a barrier to the success of the intent of the Oranga Tamariki practice shift.

Regional Oranga Tamariki leadership said that, at their level, there seemed to be an expectation from other government agencies that Oranga Tamariki will be able to cover the shortfall in funding of other agencies.

*“Education, Health and Work and Income... and we are seeing in the courts that if there is a shortfall in those agencies, the courts will look to OT to cover gaps”.*

Oranga Tamariki kaimahi described housing difficulties, such as parents unable to have their tamariki back until they have secure housing, but not being able to access a home when their tamariki are not yet in their care.

*“The hardest thing moving kids home is we don’t have any way to escalate the situation with Kāinga Ora. We need housing when the return to home is about to begin. We have this [memorandum of] understanding but actually when we are looking to start the transition, we need suitable long-term accommodation, a new whare and it’s just not there.”*

Parents told us the costs of rent and utilities was described as out of reach for many whānau, and a time-consuming part of social work kaimahi roles was attempting to secure housing and other support where resources are scarce.

Without secure housing, Oranga Tamariki kaimahi described the return home transition as an “uphill battle”. They said that many of the whānau they work with live in emergency accommodation and must move regularly. This then introduces day-to-day burdens such as tamariki not knowing how to get to school, having to move schools, tamariki and parents not being able to develop relationships with teachers, affordability of transportation, and ultimately not being able to develop family routines that create a nurturing home environment.

*“You can’t address other issues like addiction or trauma when you’re in a hotel room and you have to move from week to week. You can’t afford to get the kids to school, [there’s no stability].”*

Kaimahi said that better collaboration between Oranga Tamariki, Work and Income and Inland Revenue would result in better outcomes for whānau. This would help prepare whānau earlier, have them receiving better supports and ensure they are receiving the benefits that they are entitled to.

*“It would be good if WINZ, IRD would work with us to put things in place for the whānau. We can help to set families up much quicker and have them receiving better supports or on benefits that they are entitled to if these organisations [Work and Income and Inland Revenue] would only allow us to help with the whānau sitting with us - this all helps to prepare for better return homes”.*

Some kaimahi had the perception that it had become more difficult recently to access Work and Income support for parents with tamariki returning home. Kaimahi we spoke with told us that it's taking too long for parents to access benefits that they are entitled to, especially when Oranga Tamariki still hold a custody order.

Where tamariki are placed with caregivers, a caregiver allowance is paid to cover board, personal items and pocket money. When tamariki return home, financial assistance shifts from Oranga Tamariki to Work and Income or Inland Revenue, and it is this transition that's not always smooth. One kaimahi told us they had seen delays of up to six months to secure benefit payments, resulting in Oranga Tamariki supplying petrol and supermarket vouchers so parents could provide for their tamariki.

This lack of coordination and collaboration between government agencies is consistent with the findings in our *2021/2022 Experiences of Care in Aotearoa* report, but with different agencies involved.

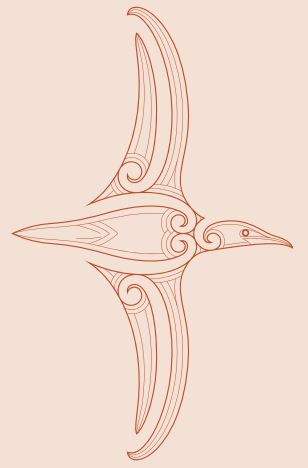
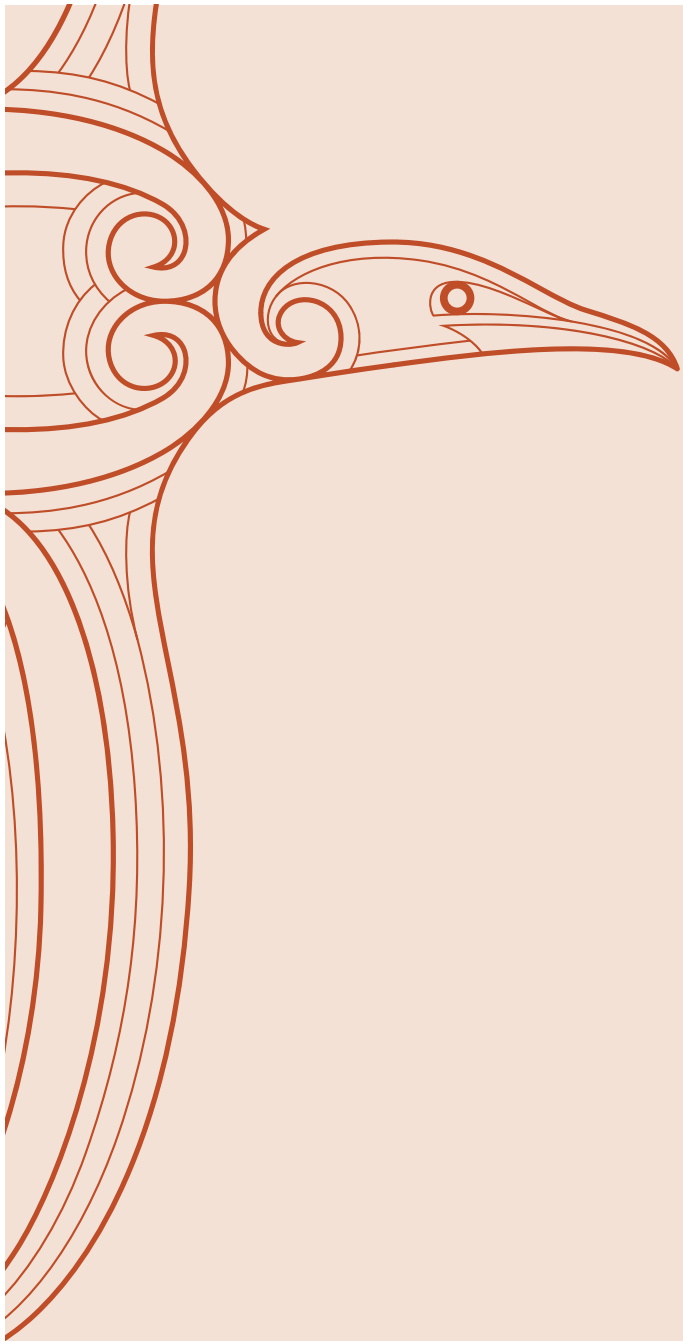
The Oranga Tamariki Action Plan is aimed at enabling agencies to work better together to address the concerns we heard. We will be monitoring this through our *Experiences of Care in Aotearoa* annual reporting.



# Glossary

<b>Agencies</b>	Oranga Tamariki, Open Home Foundation and Barnardos – the three agencies in Aotearoa that have custody of tamariki and rangatahi.
<b>Care or custody</b>	In relation to tamariki and rangatahi, being subject to an order for custody or sole guardianship or to a care agreement, in favour of the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki—Ministry for Children, an iwi social service, a cultural social service, or the director of a child and family support service.
<b>Caregivers</b>	People who care for tamariki and rangatahi in custody of Oranga Tamariki, Open Home Foundation or Barnardos. Caregivers can be whānau or non-whānau. They provide a range of care options including respite, short-term, or permanent care. Caregivers are sometimes referred to as foster parents or carers.
<b>Communities</b>	When we talk about communities, we are referring to iwi and Māori organisations, care partners and organisations providing services to the community.
<b>Gateway assessment</b>	An interagency process between health and education services and Oranga Tamariki to identify the health and education needs of tamariki in care, and how they will be supported.
<b>Hapū</b>	Sub-tribe
<b>Hui-a-whānau</b>	Oranga Tamariki meeting that occurs during Child and Family Assessment. Includes family/whānau in planning to meet tamariki needs.
<b>Iwi</b>	Tribe
<b>Kaimahi</b>	Staff
<b>Kōrero</b>	Conversation or discussion.
<b>KPI</b>	Key performance indicator.
<b>Lawyer for Child</b>	Independent lawyer allocated by the Family Court who represents the interests of tamariki and rangatahi.
<b>Legal guardian</b>	An adult who is responsible for making decisions about important aspects of a child's life, for example religion and education.
<b>NCS Regulations</b>	Oranga Tamariki (National Care Standards and Related Matters) Regulations 2018. These came into effect on 1 July 2019, and set out the standard of care tamariki and rangatahi can expect to receive when they are in the care of one of the agencies.
<b>PCSS</b>	Permanent Caregiver Support Service.
<b>Rangatahi</b>	Defined by the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 as a young person or young people aged 14 years or over.

<b>RRH</b>	Return or Remain Home – a care type where tamariki are in the custody of Oranga Tamariki while being cared for by their parents.
<b>SoCiC</b>	Oranga Tamariki Safety of Children in Care Unit.
<b>Support Order</b>	A Support Order can be put in place under Section 91 of the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 to provide support to tamariki or rangatahi for a period of up to 12 months.
<b>Tamariki</b>	Defined by the Oranga Tamariki Act 1989 as children aged under 14 years.
<b>Tamariki Māori</b>	Children of Māori descent.
<b>Te ao Māori</b>	The Māori world.
<b>Tuituia assessment</b>	An assessment used by Oranga Tamariki to capture information about the needs of tamariki and rangatahi. Tuituia focuses on holistic wellbeing of tamariki and rangatahi; capacity of their caregivers to nurture their wellbeing; and whānau, social, cultural, and environmental influences on them and their caregivers.
<b>Whakapapa</b>	Genealogy that connects a person to their identity and tūrangawaewae (place to stand).
<b>Whānau</b>	People who are biologically linked or share whakapapa. For our monitoring purposes, whānau does not include whānau caregivers, but does include parents, whānau members living with tamariki at the point they have come into care or whānau who are close to, and/or involved with tamariki on a day-to-day basis and who have been involved in decision making about their care.





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