Mana Whānau Evaluation Report

March 2026

Prepared for: Lifewise

Prepared by: Alex Woodley and Annalise Myers from Point and Associates

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Acknowledgements

This evaluation reflects the generosity, courage and commitment of so many people. First and foremost, we wish to acknowledge the whānau who shared their stories with us. Speaking about times of stress, uncertainty and vulnerability is not easy. Your honesty, insight and willingness to reflect on both the challenges and the changes in your lives made this report possible. We are deeply grateful for sharing your thoughts, ideas and for your trust. Your experiences are at the heart of this evaluation and of Mana Whānau itself.

We acknowledge the tamariki whose wellbeing is the reason this programme exists. While your voices are often shared through your parents and caregivers, your experiences underpin every aspect of this work. We want you to be safe and thrive.

We thank the kaimahi who walk alongside whānau each day. Your warmth, persistence, practical skill and unwavering belief in the families and whānau you work with were consistently described as central to the programme's success. The phrase "do what it takes" came through strongly in interviews, and this report reflects the impact of your commitment.

We also acknowledge the leadership and staff of Lifewise for your vision in developing, sustaining and strengthening Mana Whānau. Your commitment to keeping tamariki safely within their whānau and communities represents such a strong practical expression of evidence, compassion and social justice.

We recognise the stakeholders and partners, including those in statutory and community agencies, who contributed insights and data to this evaluation.

Finally and importantly, we acknowledge the broader context in which this work sits. The findings of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (2024) remind us of the profound and lifelong consequences of separating children from their whānau and placing them in unsafe environments. Mana Whānau offers a hopeful and practical alternative. It honours the strength of whānau and the right of tamariki to grow up safe, connected and loved.

Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi.
With your contribution and ours, the people will thrive.

Ngā mihi nui,

Alex Woodley and Annalise Myers

POINT & ASSOCIATES

Executive Summary

For whānau living under the sustained, cumulative weight of stress, programmes and agencies that do not account for this reality may be inadvertently adding to whānau stress rather than alleviating it.

The narrow focus on assessing parenting risk to protect children has meant that insufficient attention is being directed towards alleviating the stressors, social determinants and systemic changes that could help to reduce child harm. These include the economic, environmental and cultural barriers that which, if addressed, could enable children and young people to be cared for safely within their families and communities.

The Mana Whānau programme was designed to demonstrate that care and protection can be undertaken differently and safely. The focus is reducing the risk of harm to children while in the care of their family, as an alternative to removing tamariki from their homes.

The programme supports both whānau at imminent risk of having their tamariki removed by Oranga Tamariki, and those with tamariki already in Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children care who need support to have their tamariki return home.

The programme was developed in response to the evidence that showed:

- Being separated from whānau has a negative effect on both tamariki and their whānau.
- It is in the best interest of the tamariki to remain safely in the care of their whānau, wherever this is possible.
- While many whānau have a background of trauma, care and protection and stressors, change is possible.
- With the right support and resources most whānau have the ability to care for their tamariki safely.
- Toxic stressors, such as poverty, family violence, household dysfunction, poor housing conditions, overcrowded households, and food scarcity, must be reduced or removed for whānau to be able to build their capabilities.
- Change is more likely and sustainable when whānau determine and drive the changes they want to make.

Mana Whānau is only suitable for whānau where there is enough safety for children to be left at home when Mana Whānau staff are not present, and enough safety for staff. If it is not possible to keep the whānau together and the tamariki safe during periods when staff are not there, Mana Whānau is not an appropriate programme.

The key components of the programme are:

- Staff work intensively with whānau in their homes, for a significant number of hours per week. The times and the number of hours worked are those that suit whānau. Kaimahi do the number of hours required and do what it takes.
- It is an authentically whānau-led process with tamariki at the heart. The initial three-way agreement identifying the concerns and overarching goal is agreed by Oranga Tamariki, Mana Whānau and the whānau themselves.
- The identification of stressors, goals, pathways, priorities, work, and the pace of that work, are determined by whānau.
- There is recognition that stressors need to be reduced or removed in order that whānau have the mental bandwidth to build on their skills and capabilities.
- The programme is flexible and tailored to the needs and choices of each whānau.

The aim is to work with whānau whose core capabilities are challenged by toxic levels of stress and trauma, to:

- identify and reduce the stressors
- support strong and responsive relationships between tamariki and adults
- work alongside whānau in their home, coaching, modelling, positively reinforcing and providing opportunities to develop and practice the parenting skills they need to care for and parent their tamariki effectively and safely. This includes supporting whānau to 'serve and return', i.e., interact, respond, and encourage positive interactions with their tamariki, and to build natural whānau and community supports for long-term resilience.
- The whānau need to be willing to engage and to agree that they want to work towards change.

Introduction

Mana Whānau is a six-month, intensive, in-home parenting support programme designed to keep children who are on the edge of care, or have been removed by Oranga Tamariki, safely in the care of their own whānau and communities.

The Mana Whānau programme was developed by Lifewise in Auckland in 2017 following an initial pilot in 2015. It was subsequently adopted by Wesley Community Action in Porirua in early 2019. Due to the successful outcomes for whānau, the programme was expanded.

An initial evaluation found that in the two years to July 2020, a total of 44 whānau with 139 tamariki started the programme; 26 whānau in Auckland and 18 in Porirua.

Of those, 39 of the 44 whānau (89%) had retained or had their tamariki returned. In total, 130 tamariki (94%) were living safely together with their whānau.[1]

Whānau in the programme, staff and stakeholders also reported that:

- The care and protection issues which initiated the involvement of Mana Whānau for those whānau who had children in their care had been resolved.
- Toxic stressors, such as poor housing, financial stress, poor maternal mental health, had reduced significantly.
- Parenting capabilities had improved.
- Outcomes for tamariki (such as health, education and behaviour) had improved.
- Access to natural and community resources had strengthened, although some whānau still experienced feelings of loneliness and isolation.

This report provides an updated evaluation of the Lifewise Mana Whānau programme, building on the 2020 review. The purpose is to understand the programme's longer-term impacts and outcomes, if any, on tamariki and their whānau.

The report also documents the programme's design, its key components, and explores the ways in which it has supported families and whānau to remain safely together. In addition, it identifies the ongoing barriers that whānau face and considers opportunities for strengthening the programme in the future.

Background

The care and protection system in NZ is intended to keep children safe. When there are concerns that a child is experiencing harm through abuse, neglect, deprivation, or a lack of safe and adequate care, Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children can assess, intervene and remove babies, children and young people, into state care.

The numbers in state care in New Zealand have been trending down, from 6,350 in June 2018 to 4,391 children and young people on 30 June 2024.[2] Tamariki and rangatahi Māori, however, remain over-represented in the care population.

The Mana Whānau programme is inspired by both international and New Zealand evidence that children and young people generally do better in the care of their whānau (Baldwin et al., 2019; Doyle, 2013; Goemans et al., 2015; Rapsey & Rolston, 2020.) This evidence is reinforced by the findings of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (2024), which showed systemic factors and a lack of whānau support contributed to children being placed in State and faith-based care between 1950 and 1999, and highlighted both the extent and impacts of the abuse and neglect they endured. While historic, the Royal Commission found that children and young people were more likely to be placed in State and faith-based residential and institutional (direct or indirect) care if they had experienced poverty, family crisis or violence, parental abuse and neglect, or were deaf, disabled or mentally distressed, particularly if there was a lack of support

for the household from others. The impacts of colonisation, urbanisation, the break-down of social structures, and racism saw Māori more likely to be placed in State care.

Their findings, based on the best available estimates, indicate that up to 200,000 people were abused in care over the period investigated. Neglect, along with sexual, physical and emotional abuse were pervasive. Many survivors were found to have experienced multiple forms of neglect and abuse.

The Royal Commission acknowledged that decision-makers believed that out-of- whānau care would lead to better life outcomes, however, it was found that these beliefs, even when genuinely held, were often without foundation. Most survivors, they reported, suffered harm and have not been able to live their lives to their full potential.

While the Royal Commission has called for Aotearoa New Zealand to do everything in its power to make sure that our care system is safe for every child, young person and adult, concerningly, The *Experiences of Care in Aotearoa 2023/24* report from Aroturuki Tamariki (the Independent Children's Monitor) has found that being in the care system is still not safe for every child with many experiencing harm. Even more disturbingly, over the past four years the number of tamariki and rangatahi being abused in care has been increasing. In the year ending June 2024, 507 tamariki and rangatahi (nine percent of all tamariki and rangatahi in care) were found to have been abused or neglected while in the custody of Oranga Tamariki. This has trended up from 411 in the year ending June 2020. The areas where disproportionate levels of abuse continue to occur are in secure residences and when children return to their parents' care.

Report after report, including that of the Royal Commission (2024), have stated the system of child protection and care in Aotearoa requires substantial changes, including prioritising prevention and building stronger support systems to keep children and young people safe and out of care.

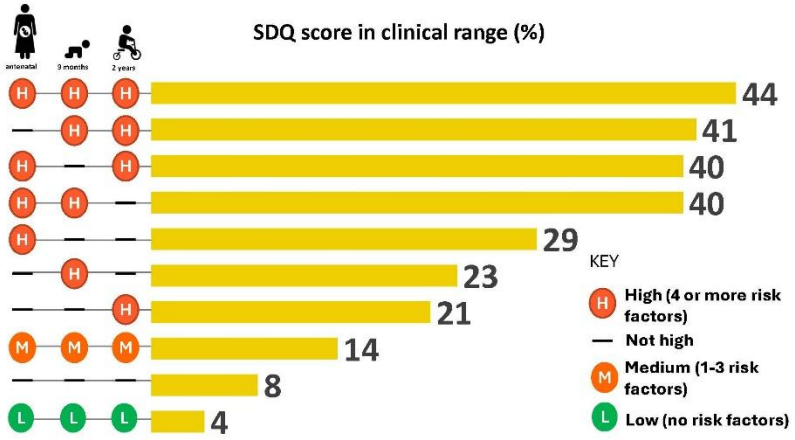
While acknowledging that such reforms require significant financial investment, Hyslop and Keddell (2022) argue the profound individual, social and financial cost of the poor outcomes of children in care justify the costs. Although the social costs have been well documented, the actual financial costs of the care system are less clear. A 2006 study in Victoria, Australia calculated that children in care generate an additional lifetime cost of $738,741 when compared to other children (Raman, Inder & Forbes, 2006). Raman, Inder & Forbes, 2005) Rankin (2011), a Senior Advisor at Child, Youth and Family (CYF) New Zealand, estimated the additional cost to the state of meeting the lifetime needs of children brought into the care of CYF to be over $750,000 per child. More recently, Jenkins, (2020) estimated the lifetime costs of abuse in state care at $857,000 per survivor.

While there is no consolidated figure for annual care system costs, the costs to the NZ economy are likely to be considerable. The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (2024) estimated the historic and ongoing economic burden of abuse in state and faith-based care at between $97.5 billion and $219 billion; an annual average cost of between $1.39 billion and

$3.13 billion. These figures demonstrate the profound economic consequences of systemic failures (Jenkins, 2020; Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, 2024).

One alternative to state care is supporting whānau to keep their children safely in their care. Neuroscientific research (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016) shows that adults require a core set of capabilities to parent effectively, particularly those linked to self-regulation and executive function, such as the ability to plan, strategise and problem- solve. Stressors such as poverty, family violence, homelessness, and poor mental or physical health, especially when experienced cumulatively, can overwhelm whānau, reduce parents' executive functioning, and create toxic stress responses in children that disrupt healthy development. Prolonged exposure can rob parents of their bandwidth, limiting their capacity to learn new skills and take on new information, reducing the effectiveness of interventions like parenting courses (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016).

An analysis of Growing Up in New Zealand data has found when toxic levels of stress are present (defined as the cumulative weight of 4 or more stressors) the outcomes for children tend to be worse than those exposed to fewer stressors (Woodley, 2017). When the stressors are removed the outcomes for children improve, within quite short timeframes. Conversely when stressors are added, the child outcomes worsen. The graph below shows the relationship between stressors on whānau antenatally, at 9 months, and 2 years and behaviour in children in the clinical range at the age of 4 years as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties scores (a psychological tool). This pattern was repeated against almost every outcome explored in the Growing Up in New Zealand data, from preschool counting skills to unintentional injury rate and BMI.



Source: Growing Up in New Zealand

(Woodley, 2017)

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- build natural whānau and community supports for long-term resilience.

The whānau need to be willing to engage and to agree that they want to work towards change.

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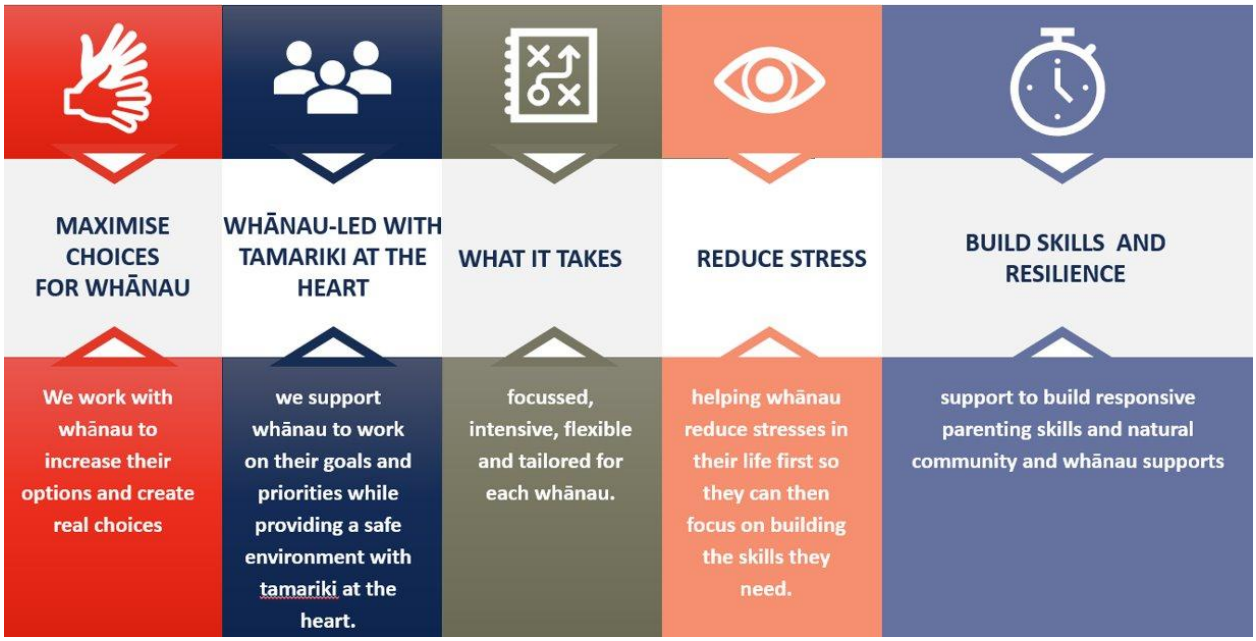
[1] While the initial evaluation was until 30 June 2020, an update on 30 November 2020 found 67 whānau had kept 188 tamariki safely in their care.

[2] Aroturuki Tamariki. (2024). About tamariki and rangatahi in care. Retrieved from https://aroturuki.govt.nz/reports/eoc-23-24/about-tamariki-and-rangatahi-in-care.

Principles and theory of change



The Mana Whānau theory of change contends that there is an opportunity to prevent tamariki from entering or remaining in care by providing intensive in-home support, reducing immediate risk, addressing and removing stressors identified by the whānau, building parenting capability and capacity, and strengthening natural and community supports. It is also contended that the approach and way of working is as important as the practical support provided.

The Mana Whānau programme is underpinned by principles that guide the way of working; namely, that choices for whānau are maximised, the programme is authentically whānau-led with tamariki at the heart, kaimahi do what it takes to reduce stressors and support whānau to build skills and resilience. Kaimahi support whānau to work on the goals and priorities that matter to them. The support provided is designed to be non-judgmental, empathetic, and respectful.

It is hypothesised that alleviating risk factors, reducing toxic stress levels and building executive function will free up the bandwidth required to parent more effectively and learn new skills and capabilities. Whānau will be supported to thrive, and tamariki will have responsive adults in their lives who support their wellbeing.

The broad goal is that tamariki are safe and thriving living within their own whānau and their own communities.

In summary, the theory of change contends that if we:

- support whānau with intensive cultural, practical, spiritual, emotional, whānau- led and tamariki-centred practice, and

- support whānau to reduce or remove toxic stressors such as financial hardship, housing issues and mental distress, and
- support and build on whānau and whānau protective factors, and
- support whānau to build on their parenting capability and executive functioning.

By:

- introducing a dedicated worker to whānau for an intensive, intentional number of hours per week (initially) in their home, and
- listening to whānau and providing practical empathetic responses to address the immediate stressors as identified by them, and
- providing practical, empathetic and non-judgmental support, and
- identifying, connecting and strengthening resources within whānau and their community, and valuing the role and contribution of whakapapa to restorative healing processes, and
- encouraging self-determination and affirming active skill-building and responsive parenting in their home.

Then this will eventually result in the following outcomes:

- tamariki will live safely together with their whānau
- Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children will end their engagement with the whānau
- whānau will be confident and resilient whānau and able to protect their tamariki
- whānau will be more connected to their community and support networks
- whānau will gain confidence, and
- the tamariki will feel safe and well cared for.

Approach

Mana Whānau requires a very different approach and way of working. The key differences are:

- The number of hours that staff work with whānau. Staff work intensively with whānau in their homes. The times and the number of hours worked are those that suit whānau. The level of contact is tailored to the needs and circumstances of the whānau. Kaimahi (whānau support kaimahi) are available around the clock, including nights and weekends. Support is arranged at times that align with when families say they need it most, such as

early in the morning, during mealtimes and bedtimes, or over the weekend when both whānau and extended whānau can be involved.

- It is an authentically whānau-led process. The initial three-way agreement identifying the concerns and overarching goal is agreed by Oranga Tamariki, Mana Whānau and the whānau. identification of stressors, goals, pathways, priorities, work and the pace of that work are determined by whānau.
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- build natural whānau and community supports for long-term resilience.

Evaluation method

The aim of the evaluation is to understand the changes, including the outcomes and impact on whānau after the programme ceases. This evaluation is based on:

- In-depth interviews with whānau who agreed to participate in the evaluation (34).
- Lifewise recontacted 78 whānau, inviting them to participate. Of the list, four were uncontactable as their details were no longer current, and 34 were contactable within the timeframe. Those who participated were given a $50 voucher in recognition of their time.
- A review of data from 110 families with 386 children, who had been on the programme between 2017 and 2024. The families were chosen at random from those who had completed at least part of the programme. The data were de-identified to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.
- A review of the key documents, tools and templates developed.

- Interviews with key stakeholders and Mana Whānau staff and managers (10).

The interviews followed a semi-structured interview schedule. The participants were asked about any outcomes and impacts of the programme, what had worked well, what had not worked well, and how they felt the programme could be improved. The interviews were conducted by phone. The data and interviews were analysed thematically using an inductive approach.

Background

Referrals

Referrals to Mana Whānau were made by Oranga Tamariki, based on a set of safety and suitability criteria. Key considerations included whether the whānau wanted to engage with the programme, whether they were comfortable with kaimahi working alongside them in their home, and whether the environment was safe for both staff and tamariki.

Practical issues such as health and safety risks, the presence of aggression, and the ability for children to be safely cared for when Mana Whānau kaimahi were not present were assessed. Drug and alcohol abuse or family violence were also taken into account. While Mana Whānau will work with whānau who have addiction and family violence histories, those who were actively using methamphetamine were not considered suitable for the programme.

Importantly, while Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children initiated the referrals, participation ultimately depended on whānau choice, with the most critical factor being their willingness to work in partnership with the programme. It is noted that in recent years, as whānau hear from others about the programme, they are asking Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children - to refer them.

Goals

Once the referral was accepted, a three-way agreement was developed, stating the key concerns held by Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children (and sometimes others) in clear, simple terms, along with a statement of what needs to happen for Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children to feel confident in closing the case. These statements provide whānau with a clear vision of the future and the overarching goals to work towards.

Mana Whānau becomes the lead agency

Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children and Mana Whānau staff work closely and in partnership in the early stages. Once the safety goals are agreed by all parties, including the whānau, Mana Whānau takes the lead and together with the whānau they focus on the Overarching Goal and goal plans, which often include a safety statement. Typically, whānau appear to have seven or more agencies working with them at the time Mana

Whānau becomes involved. Whānau can find working with multiple agencies stressful and overwhelming, so they are asked to identify the agencies they wish to continue with or would like to engage with. Mana Whānau asks all other agencies, including Oranga Tamariki, to step back while Mana Whānau works with the whānau.

Culturally grounded

Mana Whānau draws on Māori cultural values and worldviews. The programme is guided by principles such as manaakitanga (care and respect), whanaungatanga (relationships and belonging), and kotahitanga (collective action), ensuring that whānau are supported in ways that affirm their identity and uphold their mana.

Home based

The programme takes place in whānau homes and their community. As the kaimahi and whānau spend intensive amounts of time together in the home of the whānau, the relationship with the whānau needs to be respectful, warm and compassionate. The kaimahi see themselves as guests in their home.

Kaimahi

Kaimahi are at the heart of the programme, build the relationship with whānau and undertake the day-to-day support. The kaimahi:

- work to build a trusting, supportive relationship with whānau
- listen carefully and non-judgmentally to the needs of the whānau
- work with the whānau to identify their toxic stressors
- work with whānau to reduce the cumulative weight of those stressors
- work together on parenting, homemaking and safety improvements identified in the overarching goal/statement
- help the whānau to build their natural social and community supports, and importantly
- hold the hope that by keeping whānau together change is possible.

This approach is designed to free up bandwidth (the ability of families to think beyond immediate presenting issues and crises) and to build executive function (the ability to plan, prioritise and focus), as prolonged and severe stress can rob the brain of these functions. It is also designed to support parenting capabilities and build resilience.

The kaimahi have diverse backgrounds, skills and experiences, which enables them to be matched with whānau culturally and on other qualities.

Supervision

Supervisors support the work of the kaimahi. As the role is a critical component of the programme, it needs to be adequately resourced. The Supervisors:

- work with Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children to identify whānau and keep the referral process moving
- are available to support staff and provide staff with guidance and advice
- facilitate the weekly goals-setting meetings with the kaimahi and the whānau in the initial weeks of the programmes and then move to monthly meetings
- visit whānau to support staff and deal with challenging issues (it helps to reinforce the approach with whānau and staff)
- are available to work with organisations such as Kāinga Ora - Homes and Communities to resolve issues at a senior level.

Mana Whānau supervisors are also directly involved with each whānau to support initial goal-setting and agreements, and regular progress reviews. The kaimahi work in teams of three. Each team of three is supported by a supervisor. The team carries a caseload of around six whānau at any one time.

Findings

Referrals

A review of the data indicates that referrals from Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children were often triggered by a constellation of risks rather than a single issue.

Neglect and unmet basic needs were a concern with some households lacking adequate food, bedding and furniture. Many whānau were living in emergency accommodation or poor or unsafe homes that were overcrowded, damp, or unhygienic living conditions. Some had issues with hoarding.

School attendance concerns were also common, with tamariki missing school or arriving hungry and unkempt. There were also concerns relating to children's unmet health needs, with some children having undiagnosed health issues or missing critical health appointments.

One of the most consistent concerns related to family violence and physical harm. Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children was concerned that children were being exposed to repeated episodes of violence between adults, as well as direct assaults, physical discipline and emotional abuse. Concerns about alcohol and other drug (AOD) misuse were also widespread. Methamphetamine use was particularly prominent, with the key concerns being babies born substance-exposed, parents relapsing after periods of sobriety, and the "chaos" that results when substance misuse takes precedence over

children's needs. Alcohol misuse and cannabis use also featured in referrals, with Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children commonly requiring that homes remain "drug-free and alcohol-free" as a condition for safe parenting.

It is noted that alcohol and other drug (AOD) misuse, particularly methamphetamine abuse, was often intertwined with violence and neglect. Several whānau used harmful substances during pregnancy with babies testing positive for methamphetamine, and there were cases of parental relapse under stress.

It was noted that poor parental mental health and trauma histories were seen as affecting the ability of caregivers to parent safely. Many caregivers had been raised in care or survived abuse, grief, and loss, with presentations including depression, bipolar disorder, suicidality, and post-traumatic stress.

While less frequent, there were concerns that some children had been sexually abused, had been exposed to harmful sexual behaviour, or were demonstrating sexualised behaviours. As a result of the concerns identified, Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children recognised that whānau would benefit from support to parent safely.

Goals

The goals centred on supporting and strengthening whānau so that children could remain safely at home. For Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children, stable and secure housing, adequate food, clothing, and medical care were seen as essential requirements, alongside families supporting children's educational, health, and developmental needs. At the heart of these goals was ensuring there was sufficient safety and an environment where tamariki feel safe, loved, and nurtured.

They also prioritised parents building their skills and confidence through parenting programmes, in-home support, and practical coaching, so they could respond positively to children's behaviour and strengthen attachment. The goal of this parenting support was to enable caregivers to establish stable routines and clear boundaries, enabling children to thrive through consistent school attendance, engagement in extracurricular activities, and predictable daily rhythms.

Finally, Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children valued families drawing on whānau, cultural, and community supports to create strong, protective networks that build resilience.

Together, these goals supported the vision for children to grow up in safe, stable, and nurturing environments where both their immediate needs are met and their longer-term wellbeing is supported.

Motivation to join Mana Whānau

While the parents' primary decision to participate in Mana Whānau largely stemmed from the fear of children being removed or not returned, most whānau said they were motivated by the desire to be "good parents" and have a strong, warm and positive relationship with their children. Many spoke of having low confidence, little support, childhoods with few positive parenting role models or experiences, and few skills and strategies to draw from.

Some undertook the programme during periods of acute distress, when they were at breaking point or overwhelmed. Those having children returned were particularly vulnerable with the children often displaying poor attachment, challenging behaviours, disrupted routines, feelings of loss of relationships with other children who had been in care with them and adults such as caregivers or teachers who had been significant in their life. Some parents felt both overwhelmed and fearful their children would be removed again. *"I don't know what the hell I'm doing… I remember I was on the floor crying when they first got returned."*

Others described having a background of trauma and family violence and were unsure how to parent children who had also experienced trauma.

> *"We'd just walked away from a high-risk, violent relationship. I was reaching out for support with my children and help to deal with them. (Their behaviour) was trauma related. I was too scared to just lay down boundaries and make them disciplined, and therefore, of course, everything escalated, and it was just crazy, eh. I needed that little extra support just to have someone there to go, 'here, try this,' or 'maybe try that way', different ideas and that, just to try and put the boundaries back into place."*

Some of the participants described their relief at being offered practical help at a time they were barely coping, and feeling judged, attacked and desperate for "helpful" help.

> *"Why do you kick someone when you're down? And they're doing all sorts of fake help, like, oh, well, we can get you to do a parenting assessment so we can see what kind of support you need. Can you just come in so we can just tell you to your face that you're doing everything wrong? But as soon as Mana Whanau (came on-board), they're like nah, nah, come with me."*

Some, however, were skeptical attending yet another programme would offer them actual support or impact their parenting.

Many of the parents, all who felt they had benefited significantly from participating, admitted they were "just doing it to tick the boxes on the checklist that Child Youth and Family had given me. I really had no choice… I wasn't expecting too much."

> *"I think they just wanted to make sure that, obviously the kids were safe and that I was able to do it. And it was really good for us although I honestly didn't think that my parenting was going to change."*

Despite reassurances the programme was voluntary, at least some of those interviewed said they saw the invitation less as a voluntary pathway and more as a requirement if they wanted to keep their children or have them returned.

> *"At the first CYFS meeting I said I needed help. What was I supposed to do? But I was told that it was Mana Whānau or residential care, or my children would be taken off me. I just needed help, not threats of having my children taken off me."*

Engagement was further motivated by the desire to reduce agencies' ongoing involvement and scrutiny. *"I was going through Family Court and Child Youth and Family had stepped in... At the start I was just like, 'Okay, let's do it, if it's going to get youse off my back."*

Many said they found the involvement of multiple agencies overwhelming and saw agreeing to Mana Whānau as a way to move towards and gain parenting autonomy.

> *"Oranga Tamariki was in my life, pretty much quite a few, quite a lot of times, my breaking point was when I had eleven organisations on me. I exploded, to the point where I fully shut down. It wasn't support. It was all over the place. "Youse expect me to do this and this and this, but who's getting me there? What money's getting me there?"*

Meeting the Mana Whānau staff

Meeting the Mana Whānau team was critical to the engagement process. Whānau described approaching the first meeting with a sense of embarrassment and uncertainty. While some looked forward to getting in-home support, many were wary, reluctant to be sent to "*yet another programme*" and expected the experience to be more of the same. *"At first I was like, 'Oh, no, I have to do another course.'"*

The interview with the team marked a turning point. Whānau impressions began to shift once they were able to talk with staff about how the programme operated and heard examples of others who had been supported to keep their children and have their Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children orders discharged.

> *"I thought this programme, they were like CYFS, but they were totally different... they wanted me to have my children. They wanted to work with me. From that first interview... she just won me over and made me even more excited to go into the programme."*

Qualities of the kaimahi

Kaimahi are at the heart of the programme, and the relationships with whānau is the key factor determining engagement. The qualities whānau valued most in their kaimahi were warmth, humility, honesty, respectfulness, and the ability to listen to what participants wanted. Reliability, small follow-up gestures, and consistent communication, even by phone or text on hard days, reinforced trust. Whānau respected kaimahi who did not over-promise. They compared this with experiences of services where they felt they had been *"sold dreams" and "delivered little"*.

The participants particularly appreciated it when kaimahi shared small parts of their own lives as they felt it made them more relatable, and it helped to break down the professional–client divide.

> *"They share a little bit about themselves so that you don't feel like they're just like every other social worker... you know that they're another human being, another parent who happens to be a support worker."*

Almost all the whānau spoke about their kaimahi with affection and gratitude. *"Oh, she was pretty beautiful, man. She was really awesome. She helped me with my kids. I learnt from her. She's got a beautiful heart and a beautiful soul."*

The fit between whānau and kaimahi was described as just as important as their skills or qualities. Even when kaimahi brought expertise and support, what mattered most was whether there was a genuine connection and trust that allowed the relationship to develop. Choice, therefore, was important.

Parents welcomed being able to change when the fit with their kaimahi did not work well. *"At first, the social worker that we had, we didn't feel very comfortable... But the next social worker we had, she was brilliant... She helped us get through what we needed to get through. Yeah. It worked well; we graduated!"* Another had felt judged by her kaimahi, noting that when she raised it, management responded, taking her complaint seriously. "I was happy to hear that she was made to do some more training. The complaint and the extra training seemed to be a positive in the long run."

Whānau aspirations

In addition to the immediate safety goals of retaining or regaining care of their children, whānau came with aspirations, such as wanting to have a calm household, stronger relationships with their children, improved routines, or to learn behaviour management strategies. Some carried a broader "dream" of being the kind of parent they had never experienced themselves

> *"I felt up until that point, a bit disconnected with being a parent and I didn't have very good role models growing up so I knew that I wanted something*

different, but I couldn't, you know. I could see the overarching dream in front of me, but there were no steps or map to get there. "

The way these goals were set was as important as the goals themselves. Whānau felt that kaimahi worked alongside them, not telling them what to do. *"She wasn't like, 'You need to do this. You need to do that.' She worked alongside me and the goals I had for my children."*

Adjusting to the programme

For many, the idea of having strangers in their home for a significant number of hours each week was challenging, and they were not sure how they would cope. One parent summed it up as *"mixed feelings… having someone I don't know coming into my home, can I trust them?* Another reflected on the intensity of the visits in the early stages: *"It just felt like it was very invasive of my privacy… it was quite intense."* Initially, shame and embarrassment compounded their fears. Whānau worried about exposing their struggles to outsiders or being seen as failing. "*I was, embarrassed, really embarrassed because of my situation and how I was handling my kids."* Others felt misunderstood and maligned and wanted an opportunity to prove they were in fact good parents. *"I knew I was a good and loving parent. I wanted the chance to show them they were wrong about me - they weren't seeing it."*

It took time to adjust to the presence of their kaimahi. "We would wake up, she'd be at our door, we'd still be in our pyjamas, my hair wouldn't be done… You've got to let them in to see what's going on. We had no choice; it was either this or we don't have our babies."

At the start of the programme, whānau admitted to feeling under surveillance and worrying that every mistake would be reported back to Oranga Tamariki – Ministry of Children. *"Oh my gosh, what if I do something wrong and it goes back to OT? That was just my biggest fear in the beginning."* Another recalled being *"nervous as hell,"* wondering if the kaimahi would judge her as others had in the past.

This fear eased as trust grew, particularly when kaimahi reassured them that their role was to support them to reach their goals and be able to keep their children, not remove them. As one explained, *"Just hearing it from them was a big relief, going, 'Okay, they are here to help me and not judge me.'"*

The efficacy of the approach

Whānau-led

Whānau described the approach as authentically whānau-led. They said they were listened to and guided both the type and pace of work and activities. *"They ask what*

you need, what you're lacking in, and they help you find solutions which are pretty f'ing yeah, you know, spot on."

Non-judgmental and supportive approach

Participants consistently valued the non-judgemental, open, and respectful approach. The way of working created an environment where whānau could be honest about what was happening at home and engage in conversations without feeling "shamed or blamed". *"They weren't judgmental… they didn't take my stories and go 'what the hell's going on.' They were more like, 'okay, let's sit together, and we can take this step by step, and find solutions.'"*

The approach was also described as direct but supportive, encouraging whānau to face challenges without confrontation: *"They did not beat around the bush, but said like, 'hey, here's a problem we've got to tackle, so let's try this, or that.'"* They valued the balance of care and honesty. *"She'd be straight up with me when I'm losing it. I've never had someone talk to me the way she did."*

The kaimahi were also positive. *"She made me always feel like I was a really good parent… when she came, we could just be ourselves."*

Importantly, many noted that kaimahi held the hope that things could change even when they were despairing, felt it was hopeless, overwhelming and they lacked self-belief. *"When no-one else believed in me, even I didn't believe in me, she believed in me. She just kept saying – you've got this."*

> *"She was what I needed at the time, which was very positive, very happy, she just always had a positive outlook on everything. She was very caring. Could feel the aroha, she was very loving. Yeah, just all those things that we need when we're going through the tough."*

The relationship that grew from this approach was valued. *"You're lucky if you get the diamonds in the sand, when you find those real nice people. Very good wairua from the kaimahi; like the spirits, the wairua were always good, it was never horrible. I was very lucky to have them."*

Do what it takes

Whānau repeatedly described the kaimahi as practical, flexible and willing to step in wherever needed. "My worker said that I had said even if I needed her after hours, I could ring her and talk to her about stuff, you know, even if she had to do a home visit after hours, she was willing to do it." Support was day or night including weekends. "If I needed anything, even on the weekend, they would bring it."

One participant recounted the relief of her kaimahi backing her up at bedtime: *"She would show up in those high-trigger situations… it was like a fairy godmother coming in the house. She stayed till quarter to 12, then sat with me over coffee and said, Congratulations. You did it. It doesn't look perfect, but you did it.'"*

They described the kaimahi as "*rolling up their sleeves*" and helping with whatever needed to be done, from helping with dishes to advocating for better support for their children at school. *"Whatever was needed, they were right there with me, by my side."*

In-home and in-person support

Participants were clear that what made Mana Whānau both different and effective was its in-home support. "*They really do need to see what's going on so they can help out as much as possible… So, it's best if you can, make the most of what you've got in front of you."*

Many contrasted it with classroom-style parenting programmes, which felt abstract and did not recognise the complex realities of their situation. *"For feisty families like us, I think you need it."* As one parent explained, *"I've done so many parenting programmes… I even said to Oranga Tamariki, I'd rather have a programme that comes into the home and sees what I'm doing right and what I'm doing wrong."*

For whānau with a background of trauma, or who had children with high needs such as autism or Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, group-based programmes were experienced as too generic. "*Sitting in a room listening to some jargon about a 10-year-old… these are teenagers, with mouths and attitudes. It didn't really fit me." Another noted "None of the parenting programmes helped me because I had ADHD kids."*

Being in the home allowed kaimahi to see the dynamics of family life as they unfolded and to address problems as they arose. *"For her to come in and start witnessing our situation made it a lot easier… instead of having to tell someone, they saw it."* Strategies could be tested and adjusted in real time.

Parents described the kaimahi as another set of eyes, noticing what worked with their children, offering alternatives when strategies failed, and enabling them to reflect on the outcomes together. This responsiveness helped parents build confidence: *"I actually got to sit down with her and have conversations I'd never done before with anyone else… she could see the changes and build on them."*

The participants felt understood, seen and that Kaimahi were responding to their actual needs. *"Even though we've done parenting programmes, drug and alcohol programmes, that's just ticking the box… but with Mana Whānau, because they're in-home, it was completely different."*

Mentoring and modelling

Mentoring and modelling were attributed to helping to build parenting capability. As one parent explained, *"She gave me help to help myself really. She wasn't doing it for me; she was helping me to help me."* This was particularly appreciated by participants who had not grown up or had access to positive role models. *"When you don't have a positive experience growing up, you've got nothing to base it on… if you're sort of like the only one in your circle that is ahead, there's nobody else there that you can get advice from, experience and knowledge, wisdom, so you kind of just end up at a stalemate."*

Kaimahi encouraged reflection and learning in real time: *"She would pause me, and we'd replay that situation and what I could do better next time."* Alongside this, they reminded parents to praise their children and be gentle with themselves. She'd say, *"Don't forget to praise the boys… it's not going to happen overnight."*

Culturally grounded

Kaimahi begin with whakawhanaungatanga, taking time to build trust and connections. Whānau are supported to strengthen ties with their marae, hapū, and iwi, reconnect with whakapapa, and draw on cultural identity as a source of resilience. Many described the relationship with their kaimahi as a nanny, aunty or as whānau. *"They were like a mum or a sister."*

Some preferred to be matched by ethnicity, describing how they felt their world view, values and way of parenting were respected. *"They made me feel comfortable in my home, because they were Māori and Islander, and I'm Māori and Islander… they made me feel like I could do it."* Others wanted a kaimahi from a different ethnic or cultural background, as it would have felt *"too close"* to have someone from their community. *"I didn't want to change support kaimahi, you start getting a connection, you don't want to lose it and have to start from scratch."*

Whānau credit whanaungatanga and being listened to as growing a foundation of trust, respect, and connection in the early days of the programme.

For Pacific and other ethnically diverse families, the programme adapts in culturally responsive ways, honouring collective values and working alongside community leaders. It is designed to affirm identity, restore dignity, and enable whānau to draw strength from their cultural foundations.

Advocacy across systems

Kaimahi did not limit their role to working within the home; they played a vital advocacy role, supporting whānau to navigate complex systems and ensuring their voices were heard. Parents valued having someone to stand alongside them.

> *"School was always a nightmare... to have someone come with me and who just really vouched, like she was my voice. Instead of having to walk in there on your own, it was kind of like having someone with you, listening to you, and she gave you that encouragement."*

Engaged with the children

The parents described how the support extended beyond parents and caregivers to actively include the children. *"It wouldn't have worked if it was just me. We needed to get the kids on board. They didn't always like the changes, but they liked her, and I think they could see it was making a difference."* This engagement helped to create changes that worked for the whole household. Children's voices were taken seriously. One parent recalled her kaimahi sat down with her daughters to create dream charts of their hopes and aspirations. As she explained, *"not only were our, mine and my partner's, dreams taken into consideration, but the girls' dreams were as well."*

Outcomes

Almost all of the children were kept in the care of their whānau

The most significant impact of the programme was that the parents were able to keep or regain care of their children.

At the end of the programme, 87% of parents retained their children

The data showed ninety of 104 whānau (87%) retained their children or had their children returned home at the end of the Mana Whānau programme. Those parents who did not retain their children largely did not engage or withdraw from the programme, had children still transitioning home, were seeking custody or were involved in a custody dispute. In situations where reunification was not considered safe, children were stabilised with caregivers or in residential placements while parents continued to address violence, alcohol abuse or other drug use, and mental health needs, with regular plans in place to review care arrangements.

In most cases, Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children signaled satisfaction with progress and outcomes, or closed files entirely. Several families progressed from higher legal thresholds (such as s. 101 custody orders) towards lower-intensity support orders.

> *"We'd been in the system for about four/five years, and we'd been working with Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children for a very long time. We just didn't feel like we needed them anymore and they felt comfortable letting us go after what they saw in the Mana Whanau assessment. So, that was really*

the last bridge on the road for us… then we were discharged and we've never looked back."

Where reunification was newly achieved or children were still transitioning, families described having clearer safety plans, consistent supervised contact for siblings still in placement, and step-downs that reflected increasing confidence in the parents' protective capacity.

For those with children removed, one spoke of how she appreciated being able to enjoy the time they can have together.

"I think it's been hard with the supervised access thing because we haven't been allowed to talk about the reasons why she was taken, but she seems to enjoy seeing me. I see her at church, we play at the playground, we play games, we do cooking. We do lots of fun stuff together."

Between one and seven years later 94% of those interviewed had kept their children

Of the 85 children across 34 whānau interviewed, 29 children (34%) had been in out-of-home care, with the remainder assessed as being on the edge of care during the programme.

Between one and seven years after completing the programme, most of the 34 whānau interviewed (94%) had retained their children safely in their care. Only three of these children (5%) were now in out-of-home care. This reduction in children in state care highlights the dual success of the programme: preventing children on the edge of care from entering state custody and facilitating reunification for those who had already been removed.

The immediate needs of whānau were met

A significant part of this work involved meeting immediate and practical needs. Many families required food support, clothing, bedding, and furniture before other changes could take hold. Mana Whānau staff provided direct assistance or helped whānau seek practical support from WINZ or community organisations.

Quick wins, such as establishing household routines or helping participants advocate for entitlements, gave whānau the confidence to see that change was possible.

Reducing stressors

Once immediate needs were met, kaimahi helped whānau remove stressors by identifying and prioritising the things they found most stressful and setting short-term and long-term goals. This helped to create a clear plan for the week ahead and enabled

both whānau and staff to monitor progress. One parent remembered, *"We would do some overarching goals… long-term and short-term goals. And then … she'd see how I am, help me out with baby."*

Staff regularly accompanied parents to the Family Court, Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children hui, school meetings, WINZ appointments, and housing providers, supporting them in accessing services and supports that would reduce their stressors. It is noted that Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children was a stressor for many whānau, so having them step back helped reduce the cumulative stress burden almost immediately.

> *"It was something important for me to do, because then OT would see me in a different way, and actually start helping me properly instead of seeing me in a certain way and then just watch me struggle, and be like, oh, no, you know. Mana Whānau made sure that they were giving me the credit that I needed, the encouragement that I needed."*

Parents, particularly those who felt powerless, overlooked, or dismissed, reported that having backup when advocating for their whānau made a difference; it also helped build their confidence that they could insist on being listened to. *"They came along with me to make sure the school actually heard what I had to say."* Importantly, whānau described kaimahi as allies who stood beside them, not observers reporting back: *"They weren't spying… they actually stood up for us and said, 'Hold on, that's not right, you need to do better.'"*

Improved housing quality and safety

A significant stressor addressed by the programme was housing, with outcomes showing clear improvements in unsafe or unhealthy living conditions. Many whānau lived in homes affected by mould, dampness, broken pipes, foul odours, and cold, unventilated spaces. Overcrowded homes contributed to sibling conflict and household stress.

The kaimahi worked with whānau and agencies to address these conditions through practical supports and advocacy. Where maintenance issues were significant, staff supported whānau to obtain Healthy Homes assessments and repairs, or advocated with Kāinga Ora - Homes and Communities for transfers to more appropriate homes. These interventions have helped to reduce physical health risks for tamariki and created safer, warmer, and more stable environments.

Addressing hoarding, clutter, and hygiene

Hoarding and clutter were common challenges, with some families experiencing infestations and significant hygiene risks. In some cases, damage and rubbish left by former partners created unsafe environments. Parents often struggled to maintain a

clean, organised environment, resulting in unsanitary living conditions affecting their tamariki.

Skip bins were provided to clear rubbish, and kaimahi worked alongside whānau, with support from volunteers, marae, and church groups, to declutter homes, carry out deep cleans, and restore safe living spaces.

Where hoarding was linked to trauma or underlying issues, counselling referrals were provided to address behaviour patterns. Outcomes included homes that were decontaminated and reorganised, children no longer exposed to unsafe hygiene conditions, and parents gaining strategies to maintain cleaner, healthier spaces into the future.

Increased stability through access to secure housing

Housing instability was a significant barrier for many whānau, with families living in transitional or emergency housing, sometimes for long periods of time, where conditions were overcrowded, stressful, and unsuitable for children. Parents described how living in confined, temporary spaces contributed to conflict and impacted whānau wellbeing.

Kaimahi played a critical role in advocating for whānau to move into more appropriate and stable housing. Through support letters, engagement with Kāinga Ora and social housing providers, and collaboration with agencies such as Taikura Trust (now Kairaranga), families were successfully rehoused. Outcomes included whānau moving from emergency and transitional housing into stable Kāinga Ora homes, improving security, reducing stress, and providing safer, more suitable living environments for tamariki.

Building household routines and capability

Beyond addressing the immediate condition of housing, Mana Whānau supported whānau to sustain improvements through household routines and organisational strategies. Where parents struggled with cleaning, shopping, or maintaining order, kaimahi provided hands-on coaching and linked families with additional supports.

Families were encouraged to develop daily routines, to maintain their homes and reduce the risk of returning to unsafe conditions. Parents reported increased confidence in their ability to keep homes clean and safe, with tamariki benefiting from healthier environments and more predictable routines.

This focus on capability-building ensured that improvements were not just short-term fixes, but changes that could be maintained over time. *"I try and keep up by having regular clean ups. There are days I feel overwhelmed, but I just remember to just do one thing. And then I feel better so I can usually do another."*

Improved school attendance

Getting children to attend school regularly was a stressor for whānau, with some tamariki frequently refusing to attend, arriving late, or absconding from school. Kaimahi and whānau worked together with schools, Oranga Tamariki, and Ministry of Education services to improve attendance.

Supports included engaging practical strategies such as organising school transport, introducing morning routines, or walking children to school with parents. For some families, daycare vans were arranged to ensure preschool-aged tamariki attended regularly. These interventions resulted in improved attendance, greater consistency, and stronger school engagement.

Responding to bullying

Some tamariki faced bullying, particularly during transitions back from state care or into new school environments. The kaimahi supported transitions through school meetings, guidance counselling, and collaboration with Transition to Adulthood services.

> *"He's on the right track with how the transition is going. The school, that's one thing I really love about the school, the principal herself has ADHD. So, she really tries to make sure these kids succeed."*

Other children experiencing bullying were supported through school-based interventions and pastoral care. These supports helped build resilience during vulnerable periods, strengthened trust in schooling, and increased whānau confidence that schools were responding appropriately to their children's needs.

Supporting behavioural and learning needs

Many tamariki presented with significant behavioural challenges, including aggression toward peers, walking out of class, or disruption linked to ADHD, some experienced intellectual disabilities. Kaimahi helped the children with their homework. *"She provided educational support, such as reading with my son, which contributed to his academic improvement. He received an award for his writing and reading skills, which was a proud moment for the family."* Others supported whānau to advocate for their children.

> *"School wasn't understanding. So, to have someone come with me instead of you having to walk in there on your own and have to try and do it. She didn't have to do all the talking, but that sense of, "No, you've got this, and I've got your back."*

Whānau were supported to access Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), Ministry of Education psychologists (MOE psychologists), and Intensive Wraparound Service teams (IWS teams), along with external programmes such as STAND. Referrals

to counselling services, such as Genesis Youth Trust, helped to address some of the underlying emotional and behavioural drivers.

While many of the tamariki have ongoing educational and behavioural needs and require longer-term support, both whānau and kaimahi have reported improvements in classroom disruptions, peer relationships, and learning environments tailored to children's needs.

Health and wellbeing

The kamahi supported whānau to address unmet health needs and health-related issues, including undiagnosed ADHD, vision problems, or long-term, untreated conditions such as headlice. Mana Whānau helped to support paediatric assessments, ADHD diagnoses and medication, glasses, and linked families with health teams for ongoing management. It is noted that practical support, such as hygiene interventions and clean clothing, have helped to reduce the associated stigmas at school.

Specialist and alternative education pathways

For tamariki with high and complex needs, mainstream schooling was not always sufficient. Mana Whānau helped to facilitate referrals to specialist education schools, secured ORRS funding, and supported registrations with Taikura Trust (Kairaranga), who work with disabled people and their whānau to identify needs and assess eligibility for government-funded disability supports.

These pathways provided tamariki with specialist support tailored to their disabilities or behavioural challenges, ensuring that their right to education was upheld even when mainstream systems had been unable to respond adequately.

Reduction in family violence

Given the strong presence of family violence in many whānau, the kaimahi worked closely with specialist services to address safety and relational harm. Referrals were made to programmes such as Te Whare Ruruhau O Meri, Women's Refuge, Whānau Resilience, and Functional Family Therapy. Whānau attended anger management, relationship counselling, and group programmes focused on recovery from and prevention of further family harm, including empowerment, legal rights, rebuilding and reclaiming.

Kaimahi noted that homes which had previously experienced frequent family harm became calmer, with fewer police callouts and clearer rules about who could be present. Some whānau experienced new incidents or programme withdrawal when violence re-emerged. It is noted in follow-up interviews that many of the parents had separated from unsafe partners, and some had put protection plans in place.

Addictions and substance abuse

A number of parents and primary caregivers engaged with Mana Whānau had current or historical issues with addiction, including alcohol, methamphetamine, cannabis, gambling, and other dependencies.

Mana Whānau supported parents to engage with treatment and recovery services, including CADS, Odyssey House, and the Salvation Army Bridge Programme. In several cases, parents were required to provide clean drug tests, demonstrating reduced or ceased use, and to actively participate in rehabilitation and support programmes.

For many, addressing substance use was central to creating safer home environments, supporting reunification with children, and enabling parents to sustain routines and positive parenting practices.

Many of the participants attribute Mana Whānau as the catalyst for turning their lives around. *"I've finally kicked the [drugs] to the curb... it's my first time being a mother, looking after, changing nappies, breastfeeding, all of that."*

While it is noted that relapses in drug or alcohol abuse was a cause of some whānau having their children removed, the outcomes were largely positive. Many parents remained clean, with testing confirming sobriety, while others reduced harmful use or chose to stop drinking to strengthen relationships.

Parental capability

Establishing routines

One of the strongest shifts parents described was the introduction of clear daily routines. For families who had been living with chaos or irregular patterns, structure created calm and predictability. As one parent explained, *"It was actually quite an eye- opener. Just how smoothly it went and how well the kids worked alongside it, the routine we set up."* Another explained how these routines have helped her daughter settle after returning from care: *"They helped us establish a routine with her because she had one with her caregivers, but we needed to bring one into my home with her."*

Kaimahi often worked intensively at the start, supporting parents with mornings, mealtimes, and bedtimes until habits became embedded. Visual tools such as boards, lists, diaries, and chore charts gave whānau practical methods they are still using. *"We got a board, so we know what we're doing every day, and we've got set tasks."* Another said, *"She gave me ideas... write jobs down and tick them off as you go. It was really helpful."* Many of the parents noted these tools have helped to reduce chaos and are continuing to be used. For many, routines were not just about getting through the day, but about restoring control and confidence as parents. Parents said they noticed calmer interactions and better responses once routines and boundaries were in place.

These routines have been carried beyond the programme into their current parenting. *"My kaimahi helped me establish better routines for the children. They learned to follow a routine during school days and relax during weekends."*

Kaimahi support also encouraged parents to be consistent in their expectations and discipline. One parent admitted, *"I'm one of those whānau that let my kids slack off every now and then..."*

Changes in household stability flowed into children's behaviour. Parents said they noticed calmer interactions and better responses once routines and boundaries were in place. One reflected: *"My son, his behaviour then was quite bad... but she helped me a lot with that, trying to get his behaviour back on track."*

Strengthening capability

Parents reported ongoing changes in their confidence and sense of competence. They described the programme as filling gaps in their knowledge with practical, lasting strategies: *"You don't know what you don't know... the advice just made me a better wahine and a better mum."* Beyond introducing new ideas, kaimahi modelled and reinforced positive approaches until they became habits that parents could sustain independently.

Referrals to parenting programmes, such as Toolbox Parenting, Building Awesome Whānau, Incredible Years, and Triple P, reinforced this learning and gave parents tools they could continue to draw on. Tailored coaching around issues like traumatic brain injury, fatigue, and rebuilding attachment further ensured that families left with skills matched to their circumstances.

Building consistency over time

A key outcome for ongoing change was increased consistency in parenting. Parents acknowledged that before the programme they often let routines slip or rules lapse. One participant admitted, *"I'm one of those whānau that let my kids slack off every now and then... she helped."* Through regular check-ins and accountability, parents learned how to keep routines and expectations steady. This has had a lasting change, with one mother noting, *"I still plan and use a diary. The structure and routine have helped a lot. It's a rollercoaster but I have more up days than down."*

Shifting responses to challenging behaviour

For many parents, sustaining change meant finding new ways to respond to difficult behaviours. They spoke about the difference between past strategies, which relied on shouting or physical punishment, and the calmer, more constructive approaches they learned and carried forward. *"I used to just mouth off and just tell them, 'You get f'd. You don't know what's going on in here.' Now, the difference between me having a*

conversation with them… rather than giving them a hiding." Another described learning to regulate herself in moments of stress: *"If you think it's taking too much out of you, just take a breath. Have a break. You can do it."*

These new approaches are supporting whānau to manage challenging behaviours more effectively, including those linked to trauma and neurodiversity. One mother said her breakthrough was realising, *"I am mum, and I'm allowed to put boundaries and discipline in. I'm not being mean. It's okay to do that."*

The most important measure of ongoing change was its impact on children. Parents report having calmer interactions, more positive responses, and improved behaviour once routines and boundaries were embedded. *"My son, his behaviour then was quite bad… but she helped me a lot with that, trying to get his behaviour back on track."* Whānau highlighted that these improvements were not temporary but continued after the programme ended, because routines and strategies had become part of daily life.

Confidence and self-belief

One of the most consistent outcomes whānau described was an increase in confidence. Many entered the programme doubting their ability to parent. *"You're surrounded by negative… the Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children process already makes you feel vulnerable, and negative about yourself, and then you add in the* possibility of losing children… there's so much negative stigma attached to all of that."

The Kaimahi worked to counter this by providing consistent encouragement, positive feedback, and tangible evidence of progress giving the participants a sense of belief in their own abilities. One parent explained how powerful it was to be affirmed: *"I walked in with no hope and came out with a bucketful of hope and some."*

The written reports from kaimahi helped to highlight the progress they were making, both to themselves and Oranga Tamariki – Ministry of Children. *"I survived today. But then she goes, well, here's your progress. And it's huge. And she made sure OT got a copy and acknowledged that."*

Confidence also came from recognising they were often breaking intergenerational cycles of harm. One participant reflected, *"I started seeing that I am good enough. I am doing my job. I am protecting my kids. Before I used to think I was a shitty parent… but now I look at my kids and go, I never want to see you down that road."*

This confidence has carried outside of parenting and the home, into the community. Many of the participants described how, as their confidence grew, they were able to better advocate for their needs and the needs of their children. *"Now I can just say it freely and not feel like, 'Oh my gosh, how are they gonna react?'… even with my case managers at WINZ, I'm able to explain what my needs are and why I need their help."*

Counselling and mental health supports

Families were referred to counselling services, maternal mental health specialists, Māori wellbeing classes, and psychotherapy to address intergenerational trauma, depression, grief, and anxiety.

Parents were encouraged to engage with trauma counselling and other therapeutic supports to manage triggers, improve emotional regulation, and build resilience. Some families were supported to take part in activities that contributed to wellbeing, such as joining a gym, while others were helped to access psychiatric services or ACC-funded counselling to address more acute needs.

Boundaries with whānau and peers

Household stability was also strengthened by learning to set boundaries with others outside their home. Parents spoke about needing to keep their homes free of people they considered unsafe influences. *"I've got family members around me still smoking meth… they try and drag me back into it by being around me, but I have to give the hard word and tell them to go home. I can't have that around my boy."*

As one father said, *"She taught me that I should always put my daughter and me first."*

Children's wellbeing and independence

The interviewees say they have observed clear improvements in their children's ability to express themselves and manage their emotions. They attribute this to the children feeling more secure in their homes and relationships, and less fearful.

> *"He's more open. He voices his opinions now; he voices the way he's feeling without hiding it."*

Another parent highlighted the change in her son's anxiety: *"It was really hard for him to even go out to the mall or shopping… he was always at home. Now he's passed his NCEA Level 1*." Improvements in emotional stability were linked to children feeling more secure in their homes and relationships.

The routines had also helped support children to become more independent. They spoke of their children attending school more regularly, as it was an expectation.

Connecting whānau with community organisations and support

Kaimahi connected families with community organisations, practical resources, respite care, after-school programmes, and extracurricular activities. In several cases, Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children funded after-school care, respite with former carers, and activities for children, which worked alongside Mana Whānau supports to strengthen the whānau unit.

They got us into the Kindness Collective for Christmas… helped me with my partner's license, got us a fruit tree, even drove me to work." These connections extended families' networks and reduced reliance on statutory services.

Where this is happening, it is helping to provide positive peer networks and created opportunities for tamariki to thrive beyond the home.

Normalised help-seeking

Many of the parents described entering the programme with a strong sense that they had to "solve all their problems" on their own. For some stigma and surveillance had made support-seeking feel like failure and they were fearful reaching out would put them on a trajectory of having their children removed. One parent reflected that a core strength of the programme was *"the ability to go, actually, I can ask for help or know where to find help,"* noting that her *kaimahi "didn't make you feel bad about needing help"* but instead made reaching out feel normal and positive.

Another parent explained how rather than her being *"all grumpy, trying to struggle through this every day,"* the visible support changed how her children responded, helping them to be *"a bit more helpful as well."*

Employment and training outcomes

The majority of parents enter the programme unemployed. For those seeking work, Mana Whānau provided practical, hands-on support tailored to individual needs, from CV writing and interview coaching to training opportunities.

Outcomes achieved were encouraging for those who engaged. Several parents gained employment following the programme. Parents who accessed CV and interview support also reported being better prepared for the job market, even if employment had not yet been secured.

Improvements

A programme that is earlier and longer in duration

There was a strong view that Mana Whānau should be offered earlier, before children were returned home, to prevent families from struggling alone. Another consistent theme across interviews was that six months of support was not long enough, especially for parents and tamariki recovering from years of abuse or trauma.

While short-term intensive interventions can spark significant shifts, participants stressed that sustained and flexible support is essential to consolidate gains, respond to developmental changes in tamariki, and continue the journey of recovery from trauma.

Whānau emphasised that healing is not linear and that different challenges arise at different stages, making it important to have support that can be accessed as needed.

Many described the value of being able to *"dip in and out"* of services, particularly as children and young people grow and their needs change rapidly.

While for many the programme created positive change, the sudden withdrawal of support was experienced as difficult and, in some cases, destabilising. As one parent reflected, *"I had 21 years of abuse. It is not going to change. To go from intensity to nothing at all is really hard."* Whānau said they needed to be able to access support during critical periods.

Transitions such as the return of another child to the home, starting school, or navigating Christmas and holiday periods were described as particularly stressful. Mana Whānau provide a skeleton staffing crew to support whānau during the Christmas close down period and a letter with those and other emergency services contacts was provided to whānau prior to the Christmas break. Despite this several parents admitted struggling to cope during these times without guidance and were unsure who to reach out to when they felt desperate or in crisis. It is noted that over the Christmas period calls to Lifewise, when a parent was in crisis, went to an answerphone. Moreover, the calls were not free, which meant that the parent was reluctant to keep ringing.

Some still have a fear of reaching out for help when needed and believe there needs to be a place where they can reach out for help without fear of having children removed.

> *"You need to be able to pick up the phone to Oranga Tamariki and say you need help without getting your children taken off you or being at risk at having them taken off you."*

Parents warned that progress could easily be undermined if families were left without trusted, accessible networks once the programme ended.

Disabilities, disorders and advocacy

Tamariki and rangatahi in care are almost twice as likely to be disabled than the general population of the same age. Across the full care population (0 – 20 years old), 31% of tamariki and rangatahi are known to have a disability. While Mana Whānau parents had children with disorders and disabilities, some described additional layers of challenge, often linked to late or missed diagnoses. Many had spent years struggling with difficult behaviours without the right tools or support.

> *"I've got a folder full of parenting courses that I've completed with all the certificates in the folder, Triple P, and Incredible Years and all of that whatnot. I've done a lot of stuff to try and benefit him - family therapy and a whole lot of things. My son is just 'extra' as everybody else likes to put it. And even working with the team at a residential school, even they were having the same issues that I had to deal with, they were struggling."*

While some children benefited from diagnoses during the programme, whānau with children diagnosed with disorders such as autism or Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, subsequent to the programme, believe the early warning signs were there, but they were missed.

> *"She was very challenging then and it's just gotten worse and worse and worse over the years with her behaviour until she was finally diagnosed and is now on daily medication. You never know when she's going to explode into a huge meltdown and she could be aggressive where she punches herself in the head or bangs her head into the tiles of the floor."*

One parent explained, *"It's not just about parenting strategies, it's about understanding the needs of a neurodiverse child."* She said it would have been helpful to understand that everyday situations, such as missing sleep, a change in teachers, or an outing, could lead to severe dysregulation in her child.

Parents wanted kaimahi to be trained in recognising the early signs of disorders so children could be assessed and diagnosed earlier. They believed early diagnosis would have explained many of the challenging behaviours they were seeing, opened the door to specialised resources, and enabled schools and health services to respond more appropriately. As one parent described, subsequent to the programme, *"When I first tried to get him diagnosed, I was black and blue all the time and my house was getting destroyed."* Another reflected on the absence of sustained help, *"I should not watch my nearly 10-year-old almost get tasered because professionals didn't do their job."*

Parents with children diagnosed after the programme are struggling to find the support they need.

> *"Pre-diagnosis, I was quite happy to get on board with Mana Whānau because I needed that help and that support to help me with parenting her and everything. And I'll tell you what I still do that help and support and that one-on-one support, but there's nothing available.*

Another described how the supports were there. *"Before they left, the extra supports were not put in place. He escalated to the point where I had to have the police involved."*

Ongoing contact to sustain relationships

Whānau would like an opportunity for ongoing contact. The withdrawal of intensive support was described as leaving a gap for both parents and children who had formed attachments to kaimahi. *"The kaiawhina comes in as that support and then when she's gone, it's a big absence. It leaves a big hole. For the child and for the parent."*

The depth of connection among parents, children, and Mana Whānau kaimahi made the programme ending challenging. Parents described missing workers long after the programme finished: *"It was sad when Mana Whānau finished up with us because my little one grew quite attached… she was still talking about her for probably another good six months to a year afterwards."*

Others echoed, *"I kind of miss them, to be honest,"* and suggested even light or occasional contact would help, "It was a while ago, so it would be nice to see her. Even if I just bump into her at the supermarket."

Supporting the whole family

Participants highlighted the importance of addressing the needs of the whole whānau, not just the child under Oranga Tamariki - Ministry for Children involvement. They stressed parents need to be on the same page to ensure consistency.

It is also important to recognise the role of the out-of-home parent in creating stability for tamariki. Even when children are primarily in the care of one parent, contact and influence from the other parent often continues. If the out-of-home parent is not fully included, inconsistent parenting can undermine the progress being made in the home. They pointed out that working with both parents and those undertaking caregiving roles helps to ensure consistent boundaries, reduces the stress of conflicting expectations for children, and helps build safer, more reliable care arrangements. Supporting out-of-home parents also reinforces the message that they remain an important part of their children's lives and have responsibilities for their children's wellbeing, which can strengthen attachment and reduce the risk of repeated involvement with care and protection systems.

Reducing loneliness and isolation

Building and strengthening social connections is critically important as whānau without these were left feeling lonely and isolated. Many whānau described having fractured relationships with whānau and friends, leaving them socially isolated or surrounded by influences that were not supportive of positive change.

> *"I didn't have any friends at the time. I was closed out and had to re-evaluate, like, who I wanted in my life and who I didn't, who was good for my new goals and who worked, and so that, like, didn't." The relationship with kaimahi helped to fill that gap. Some saw their kaimahi as whānau, similar to a nanny or aunty. "I loved it, to be honest, because I was going through a rough time and didn't have whānau support. I was in conflict with my parents and had shut myself off from my whānau."*

Others saw them as friends. Even though parents were warned that the programme would end, they felt a sense of loss and loneliness. Those who had not repaired relationships with family nor built friendships were particularly at risk. *"When she left it left me sort of with that, with nobody to feed into that social thing."*

One reflected, *"She was family more than my own family, so when she left, it was just me again… I did find that hard."* Another explained, *"I did feel really sad… I was basically just left to use the teachings, but it would have been so helpful if I had the wrap-around support after the programme."*

Peer support and groups

The participants suggested creating ongoing peer support networks, both to reduce isolation and to maintain motivation. *"Maybe a support group for all the mothers that are going through the same thing. Maybe a coffee group? Something like that might be nice."*

Another described the strength of collective encouragement: *"Other mums who've gone through this programme would feel similar, and to be able to catch up and encourage each other to keep going is mana toa for wahine, to feel supported and like, yep, on the hard days we can do this."*

Additional supports

There are opportunities for additional supports. Participants identified gaps in support for whānau navigating recovery. They would like the opportunity to spend time with others with an understanding of mental health distress, or who are recovering from addiction.

Some participants wanted sensitive claims or counselling support to be more accessible because they recognised the impact of trauma and sexual abuse on their own wellbeing and on their ability to parent. They explained that healing these experiences would help their tamariki as it would help them regulate their emotions, and parent with greater confidence.

Participants raised the need for programmes tailored to whānau whose children are in permanent care, with a focus on maintaining relationships and reducing isolation. They wanted parenting support to sustain positive connections even where full reunification is not possible.

Most whanau would recommend Mana Whānau

Overall, participants spoke positively about Mana Whānau and said they would recommend it to others. Readiness to engage, however, is critical. Many described initial hesitation, with some whānau declining the programme in the past because they were not ready for change or felt wary of outside involvement. One parent explained, *"You have to be comfortable and 100% on board with it, otherwise it can feel a bit invasive and*

for whānau that don't like invasiveness, they'd shut down." Others echoed this skepticism at the beginning: *"Before I signed up with Mana Whānau, I was like, man, what are these guys up in here being nosy? I was really skeptical."*

Despite these reservations, most participants described a significant shift once engaged. As one whānau member shared, *"She (the kaimahi) was awesome, she makes sure you feel comfortable in your home… makes you feel like you can do it."* Another reflected, *"After doing the programme… they rescued me from drowning. I would recommend them to anyone, everyone."*

Whānau noted the programme's positive impacts on their daily lives, including greater independence, improved routines, and enhanced wellbeing. Several expressed their willingness to encourage others to join.

Conclusion

The evaluation of Mana Whānau demonstrates that intensive, in-home, whānau-led support can produce significant and lasting outcomes for tamariki and their families.

The programme's holistic approach, addressing immediate needs, reducing toxic stressors, strengthening parenting capability, and connecting families to wider support, has enabled the majority of children to remain safely with their parents or return home from care.

Importantly, these gains have proven sustainable, with most families interviewed (94%) between one and seven years later still caring for their children.

The findings sit within the wider reform conversation. The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (2024) highlighted how systemic stressors such as poverty, violence, racism and a lack of whānau support pushed children into unsafe state care.

environments where many experienced neglect and abuse. Mana Whānau offers a positive alternative. It shows that when families are supported to address the stressors in their lives, with practical help, cultural grounding, parenting support and by strengthening their natural support, children can remain safely within their own whānau. This aligns with long-term goals to reduce reliance on state care and uphold children's rights to family, culture, and stability.

While programmes of this nature require upfront investment, the social and economic costs of poor outcomes for children in state care are likely to be far greater. Research has repeatedly shown that many children who grow up in out-of-home care experience poor health, lower educational achievement, unemployment, poverty, and involvement with the justice system. These outcomes not only cause deep harm to individuals and their whānau but also generate significant costs for the wider community and the government. By contrast, the costs of providing early, intensive and culturally anchored

support through Mana Whānau are likely modest when weighed against the benefits of safer homes, stronger families and reduced demand on statutory services.

The evaluation has found that Mana Whānau is more than a short-term intervention. It represents a different way of working with families, one that respects mana and whakapapa, provides practical support alongside therapeutic help, and places whānau aspirations at the centre. By embedding prevention approaches such as Mana Whānau into the care and protection system, Aotearoa can take tangible steps to address the failures exposed by the Royal Commission and build a safer, more just future for tamariki and their whānau.

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