A First 1000 Days Learning System

Making Aotearoa the best place in the world to be a child

The Southern Initiative

THE AUCKLAND CO-DESIGN LAB

What's inside

Why we need a First 1000 Days Learning System

The establishment of a learning system for the First 1000 Days is a vital opportunity to join up our implementation efforts and develop the necessary learning infrastructure to accelerate our efforts towards making Aotearoa the best place in the world to be a child.

The first 1000 days of a child's life are crucial for their future wellbeing and success. This period, when 80% of the brain develops, lays the foundation for their health, social, and economic outcomes.

International and New Zealand evidence is clear: better supporting whānau in this critical period is one of our biggest opportunities to make a lasting difference. Government has significant levers for influencing tamariki and whānau wellbeing in the first 1000 days, but this potential is not currently being realised.[1]

Current reform and transformation efforts across government are laying the groundwork for a shift towards approaches that are orientated around what matters to people in place, uphold te Tiriti, prioritise equity, and support a strengths-based approach to promoting wellbeing across generations.

There is strong alignment across agencies on this vision, and on the major strategic shifts needed to achieve it:

- from prescriptive and restrictive policy settings to flexibility, innovation and adaptive learning

- from a deficit approach that reinforces trauma, to a strengths-based and aspirational approach reinforcing tikanga and kawa

- from a centrally led approach, to more locally led approaches, supporting relevant community-based solutions

- from a transactional approach to long-term, reciprocal relationships and partnerships.[2]

There is a mandate to shift towards a whānau centred, locally led and centrally enabled system – but agencies are still grappling with the "how".

This document provides advice for public sector leaders about how to establish a First 1000 Days Learning System that will give effect to these shifts.

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1   Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy Ministerial Group: Papers for December 2021 Meeting (4466820) (2021, December 8). Appendix 2: Galvanising a collective system approach to the first 1000 days. Social Wellbeing Board. Page 6.
2   IBID, Page 5.

What is this report?

Who we are

The Southern Initiative (TSI) is an innovation unit embedded within Auckland Council that is focused on enabling social and economic transformation in South Auckland. TSI works to create the conditions for a prosperous and resilient south Auckland, where tamariki and whānau thrive.

Nested inside TSI, The Auckland Co-design Lab (The Lab) is a unique public sector innovation collaboration supported by government agencies and currently hosted in Auckland Council. Initially funded by the Better Public Service Innovation Seed Fund, since 2017 The Lab has been supported by the membership of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) and seven other central government agencies.

TSI/The Lab works alongside whānau and systems partners to demonstrate and understand the systems conditions for enabling culturally grounded, locally driven, equity and Te Titiri-led approaches to tamariki wellbeing. We work as hoa haere (learning partner) with teams who are moving towards, building, or modelling the future desired qualities of the early years system, by taking a learning approach.

Our Tamariki Wellbeing work has focussed on understanding how we can collectively activate an 'ecology of support' around whānau in the critical first 1000 days of a child's life. We have taken a strengths-based approach to working with and alongside whānau and innovation partners at local and national levels to learn what it takes to transform the system of support, reduce stress for families, build capability, and create the conditions for tamariki to have a great start in life.

Supporting the implementation of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

TSI/The Lab and the Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group at DPMC have collaborated around a shared commitment to child and youth wellbeing since the inception of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. Our Tamariki Wellbeing work contributes to the implementation of the Strategy and understanding how it can be activated in place.

We have a shared interest in the development of the system settings, capabilities and conditions that are needed to enact fundamentally different ways of working.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the basis

Socio-ecological model adapted from the Child Youth and Wellbeing Strategy

In 2021, a commitment was made by the Social Wellbeing Board and Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy Ministers to 'centrally enable an early years system that is whānau-centred and locally-led'. Since then, TSI/The Lab and DPMC have collaborated on a range of activities to explore how this commitment can be realised, including:

- Running workshops with cross-agency partners to unpack the system-level shifts that are required to achieve this aspiration

- Working closely on the development of advice around how a collective, cross agency approach to the first 1000 days can be enabled

- Establishing an Early Years Implementation Learning Platform to prototype a learning system approach and how we can bring together different agencies' system transformation efforts 'on the ground' in locality and at a systems level (outlined further below)

- Undertaking targeted engagement to support the 2022 review of Strategy, including the production of a recommendations report on unleashing the potential of whānau centred and locally led ways of working

- The development of recommendations resulting from the Strategy review and changes needed to the Strategy implementation mechanisms going forward.

Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy Review recommendation: A learning system for the First 1000 Days

The recommendations falling out of the 2022 Strategy review signalled a desired step change in how we partner and collaborate at every level of the system, particularly with an emphasis on honouring te Tiriti commitments. One of the key enablers to achieve this is the establishment of a learning system approach, with an initial focus on the first 1000 days.

The current focus of our partnership is supporting the development of this learning system, building on what we have been learning together through the Early Years Implementation Learning Platform and other related work.

Consolidating our practice-based evidence of what it takes to activate a learning system approach

This report provides an overview of our consolidated learnings about the key aspects of a learning system, based on TSI/The Lab's experience to date in implementing these kinds of approaches internally and with our partners.

We have distilled a set of principles, core components, practices and enabling conditions that have emerged through our work together with a range of government and non-government partners. These findings have been 'stress tested' with our Early Years Implementation Learning Platform Partners, including Oranga Tamariki (Tākai), Health (Te Whatu Ora), MSD, ACC, SWA and the South Auckland Social Wellbeing Board, through a Papanoho session held on 14 March 2023 and follow up kōrero.

The Early Years Implementation Learning Platform: A discovery process to understand how a learning system could operate

Since May 2022, TSI/The Lab has been convening a network of partners to develop a shared learning space that brings together different agencies' system transformation efforts 'on the ground' in locality and at a systems level. The Early Years Implementation Learning Platform links on the ground learning into the Child Youth and Wellbeing Strategy and supports a collective approach to the first 1000 days. It has created a tangible cross-agency collaboration mechanism to learn together how to reconfigure policy settings, investment, roles and ways of working to enable a whānau centred, equity focussed, culturally grounded and locally led early years system.

Where did it come from?

The Platform was initiated in response to what TSI/ The Lab were learning through our whānau led innovation work on the ground in south Auckland and in our role as a learning partner to central government agencies.

Several things had become clear:

1. Agencies are trying to achieve similar outcomes for tamariki and whānau but are often working in isolation of each other, missing opportunities for efforts and investment to be mutually reinforcing

2. What whānau tell us matters and makes the difference to their wellbeing – things like social connectedness, cultural identity and holistic supports that come from the people and places where whānau live their lives – don't fit neatly within any one agency's remit. Whānau centred, community led, whole of systems approaches are required to make a significant difference

3. Agencies are grappling with shared challenges and questions around how they work differently to achieve better and more equitable outcomes, including re-engineering policy and commissioning processes that are entrenching inequity

4. There is a missing infrastructure for connecting learning about what matters and makes the difference to whānau with decisions being made at the centre.

As a way of understanding what this 'missing infrastructure' could look like, we have convened teams from across different government agencies who are responsible for the implementation of key child and whānau wellbeing approaches – particularly those who already had a mandate and commitment to shift towards more whānau centred and locally led ways of working.

Partners committed to a twelve month initial discovery phase to act as a proof of concept/ prototype for understanding how a two-way learning infrastructure might work in practice.

The purpose of the platform is to:

- **Build, share and leverage practice-based evidence across the system about enabling whānau and tamariki wellbeing in place.** This involves connecting action and learning on the ground with whānau with policy and commissioning innovation processes

- **Establish structures and practices that support agencies to meaningfully learn alongside each other and with communities.** This helps to strengthen relational, partnership based approaches and ways of working that enable reciprocal accountability and give effect to te Tiriti o Waitangi, and includes a focus on grappling together with system level barriers to change.

- **Identify and create opportunities for agencies and communities to take collective action** and to pool and share resources to support our shared aspirations for child and whānau wellbeing in the first 1000 days, to achieve the Government's vision of a holistic, integrated and whānau-centred system of supports and services.

Niho Taniwha[1] (outlined in Appendix 1) has provided the foundation of our learning system, providing us with a methodology to connect learning by doing on the ground with system level implications.

Regular Platform convenings, known as 'Papanoho'[2] have been taking place since May 2022. Papanoho are an opportunity for partners to come together (in a carefully curated online wānanga space) to progress shared priorities, share learning and undertake collective sensemaking. The learnings from the Platform over the last year have been a critical input to this report.

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1   https://www.aucklandco-lab.nz/resources-summary/niho-taniwha
2   Drawn from the design of traditional waka hourua (double hulled canoes), a papanoho is the deck between the canoes that represents a shared space where people can come together to collectively navigate their way forward

What has the Platform achieved?

So far, the Platform has enabled:

- The establishment of a network of trusted relationships across some of the key players in the early years ecosystem

- The identification and prioritisation of shared learning pātai (questions) that we need to grapple with together to enable system transformation

- Capturing and sharing of practice-based evidence e.g. Tākai's 'Whanaungatanga Model of Funding', an exemplar of relational commissioning

- Prioritisation and action on shared priorities for us as a network, including:

  - **Evolving commissioning mechanisms** (supporting the implementation of relational contracting and the implementation of the Social Sector Commissioning Action Plan)

  - **Deepening our approach to ROI, indicators and measures,** including initial work on a return on investment model for prevention

  - **Growing te Tiriti-led practice,** understanding the capabilities and conditions that need to be enabled, and what this looks like from the perspectives of Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti

Connecting partners with other government agencies holding the pen on decisions

Cross-fertilisation of ideas

A safe 'risk-taking' environment

Closer relationships with community innovators

Building my 'phone-a-friend' network

Changed our reflection practice internally

What is a learning system?

What it means & why we need one

What do we mean by a learning system?

"Working in a complex environment means moving from managing prescribed processes to having a set of conversations which seek to govern how the system works, and how resources are distributed to enable it to fulfil its purpose."[1] Lowe & Plimmer 2019

We believe that the key to making meaningful progress towards achieving better and more equitable outcomes in the first 1000 days lies in a shift towards a learning orientation at all levels – from grassroots to central government.

It is an opportunity to mature our collaboration infrastructure and enable a more 'ground up' approach to implementation that is connected to people and place.

At all levels, we need to build the space for more dynamic feedback loops that use data and evidence for learning, and build capability and capacity of the system and people within it as we go.

The establishment of a learning system approach is part of building greater connectivity between local, regional and central understanding, decision-making and action. It creates a stronger role for policy makers and commissioners as partners in sense making, so that policy, strategy and investment approaches give effect to te Tiriti and are responsive to the aspirations of whānau, hapū and hapori and what we are learning about what matters and what works at a local level.

The scope of a learning system must include the mechanisms and ways of working that facilitate learning up and down the system, enabling the implementation of more whānau centred and locally led approaches and supporting two-way accountability[2].

The emergence of learning system approaches

"What do the 'back office' systems and structures look like that enable tackling planetary scale problems at the local level, continually sensing emerging risks & opportunities, and dynamically evolving our collective understanding of, say, climate change or inequality dynamics by harnessing hyperlocal insights and expertise?"
UNDP Innovation

"We recognise that no individual, organisation or sector can achieve sustained positive change by themselves. Instead, answers emerge from understanding diverse perspectives, collective sensemaking and taking action in uncertainty"
Centre for Public Impact

Aotearoa is not alone in our efforts to shift towards more responsive and complexity informed approaches to policy making and commissioning.

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1   Lowe, T., & Plimmer, D. (n.d.). Exploring the new world: Practical insights for funding, commissioning and managing in complexity. Collaborate CIC. Retrieved June 9, 2023, from https://collaboratecic.com/insights-and-resources/exploring-the-new-world-practical-insights-for-funding-commissioning-and-managing-in-complexity/
2   The need to develop stronger two way accountability mechanisms is also highlighted in the recent NZ Productivity Commission inquiry into persistent disadvantage. See: https://www.productivity.govt.nz/publications/final-report-a-fair-chance-for-all/

The Human Learning Systems[3] approach is an example of a compelling alternative to prevailing pubic management approaches, and indigenous led approaches already offer complexity informed ways of working that prioritise values, place and relationality[4].

Internationally we are also seeing the emergence of 'portfolio', 'mission' or 'challenge-led' approaches to tackling complex challenges in the public sector. A portfolio approach to complex social challenges involves managing a collection of diverse initiatives, programmes, or investments to address interconnected issues. It recognises the complexity of social challenges and adopts a flexible and adaptive strategy to spread resources, mitigate risks, harness synergies, and optimise the use of available resources. It fosters a culture of continuous learning and improvement to achieve meaningful and sustainable change in a holistic and systemic manner. Examples of portfolio, mission or challenge led approaches include the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, UNDP's Strategic Innovation Unit and the Civic Innovation Mission led by Griffith University's Centre for Systems Innovation.

There is increasing discussion about learning systems across government as a mechanism for helping us tackle complex challenges[5]. While these discussions are still in their development phases, there appears to be alignment around the need for:

- A stronger role for tangata whenua at the decision making table, as part of giving effect to te Tiriti

- Diversifying what is considered legitimate 'evidence' to include a focus on lived experience, indigenous knowledge systems and practice-based evidence

- Increasing investment into monitoring, evaluation and learning

- An intention to do better at capturing and elevating 'whānau voice'

- Stronger accountability for learning

- Better provision of information, data and evidence to communities to support action on the ground

- Improved decision making based on stronger intelligence about what is needed.

These are promising steps in the right direction, but they are insufficient on their own for driving critical shifts towards centrally enabling a whānau centred and locally led system. If we aren't careful, our approach to implementing a learning system risks reinforcing the status quo or "doing the wrong things righter".

For example, conventional ideas of evaluation as something that happens at the end of a project, done to you by external evaluation teams, is still a dominant paradigm. In addition to this, a focus on Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) for establishing effectiveness and value still prevails in certain settings. These approaches have their place, yet prove impractical, costly, and have less relevance in the context of complex place-based systems change.[6]

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3   Human Learning Systems: Public Service for the Real World. https://realworld.report/
4   https://www.aucklandco-lab.nz/reports-summary/kia-tipu-te-ao-mrama
5   Refer to Productivity Commission: More Effective social services, Creating a learning system (Dec 2015) and Productivity Commission; A Learning System for addressing persistent disadvantage (Feb 2023); Oranga Tamariki Action Plan, Action 10, A localised, whānau-led system learning approach to the first 1000 days (March 2023); Te Puna Aonui: Te Aorerekura Action plan: Learning and Monitoring
6   West, S., McKegg, K., Hagen, P., & Gamble, J. (2019, March 14). Innovate for Impact blog series. Centre for Community Child Health. Retrieved June 9, 2023, from https://blogs.rch.org.au/ccch/2019/03/14/new-innovate-for-impact-blog-series/

What a learning system is and what it isn't

From	Towards
Evaluation and measurement used as a compliance tool	Government and communities learning together about what works
Research and reports delivered as information	Collective sense making where key people from across the system are actively grappling with what we are learning together – bringing a diversity of perspectives and worldviews, de-risking policy and commissioning decisions, reducing duplication
Cross agency officials groups where participants report back on siloed work programmes	Key players leading transformation efforts at a system level and on the ground collaborating and learning together
Slow, linear problem solving/intervention	A faster pace of learning – actionable early learning from live implementation
Seeking to demonstrate the impact of discrete interventions	Taking a whole of systems approach to create the conditions for wellbeing
Evaluation and learning happening in a way that is disconnected from implementation decisions	Developmental evaluation and learning processes that involve real-time feedback loops to guide the work as it unfolds

The purpose of a First 1000 Days Learning System

The end game is policy making, commissioning and system stewardship that is in active relationship with the collective intelligence of the communities and whānau we serve.

Having clarity of purpose for a First 1000 Days Learning System is critical. An essential dimension that we have noticed is often missing in discussions around learning systems is the infrastructure required for learning to be a genuinely two-way process between people on the ground and central government. A process that connects lived realities with our system settings and those responsible for setting them.

The purpose of a learning system isn't just about knowledge generation and dissemination, or learning for learning's sake – learning must be geared towards driving implementation and fundamentally different ways of working in partnership with whānau, hapū, iwi and communities. It must help bring decision making closer to the lived realities of the people and place.

The purpose of a learning system is therefore to provide the infrastructure, mechanisms, and practices needed to get us from where we are now to where we need to be. The end game is policy making, commissioning and system stewardship that is in active relationship with the collective intelligence of the communities and whānau we serve.

Establishing a learning system approach for the first 1000 days is an important opportunity to create the authorising environment, enabling conditions, focus, leadership capabilities and ultimately the accountability for central government agencies to make this shift happen.

The following sections outline the principles that must underpin this approach, the core components of what this active learning process can look like in action, practices we have found to be useful in doing this work and the enabling conditions that can support success.
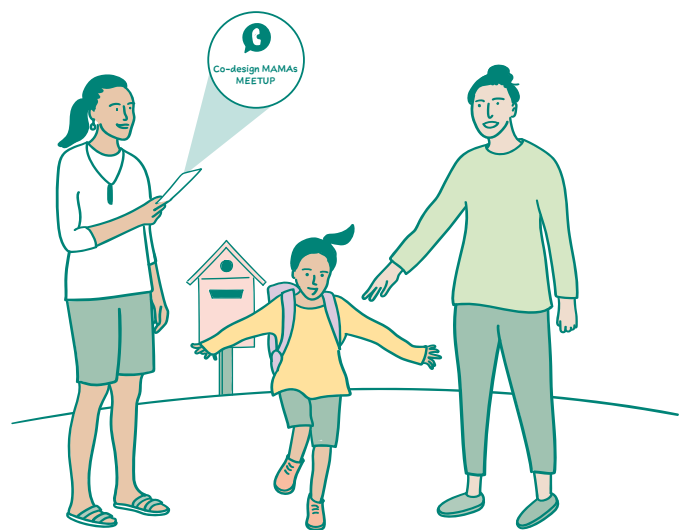
A learning system to make Aotearoa the best place in the world to be a child

Principles to guide us on our way

Here, we share a set of principles that must be embedded for the First 1000 Days Learning System if it is to be successful in delivering more te Tiriti centric, equitable, culturally responsive, whānau centred, locally led and centrally enabled ways of working. They are:

Te Tiriti as the foundation

Strengthening authentic and enduring relationships that reinforce te Tiriti, bringing whānau, hapū and iwi to the decision making table and prioritising the aspirations of mana whenua

Prioritising an equity and intergenerational wellbeing lens

Involving and prioritising those who are least well served by our systems, and creating the conditions for their wellbeing and equitable outcomes

An intentional focus on supporting central government to work differently

Not just focussing on the work 'out there' in communities

A 'ground-up' approach to systems change

A focus on better understanding what matters and makes the difference to whānau 'in place' and recalibrating investment and energy towards this. Grounding ourselves in the lived realities of where our efforts hit the ground is a critical and pragmatic first step in overcoming organisational silos.

A values-based and relational approach

That enables government to better collaborate with whānau, hapū and iwi, communities, and the wider early years ecosystem

Active involvement of whānau in the implementation learning process

Going beyond collecting 'whānau voice', rebalancing power dynamics by involving whānau as innovators and critical partners in sense making, so we can collapse the distance between the lived realities of whānau and where decisions are made.

Learning by doing

An implementation learning focus, enabling a more dynamic approach that overcomes the traditional policy and implementation divide and 'paralysis by analysis'

Valuing multiple forms of evidence and ways of knowing

Taking a more expansive definition of evidence that privileges mātauranga Māori, other cultural knowledge systems and lived experience

Starting small and creating "islands of coherence"[1]

To navigate complexity and avoid overwhelm, starting with building new ways of working in a manageable number of discrete geographic areas, and scaling this way of working out as we build confidence and momentum.

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1   Begovic, M., & Quaggiotto, G. (2022, August 16). Pivoting to strategic innovation: 3 things we learned along the way. Medium. Retrieved June 9, 2023, from https://medium.com/@undp.innovation/pivoting-to-strategic-innovation-3-things-we-learned-along-the-way-cb47e0ac09df

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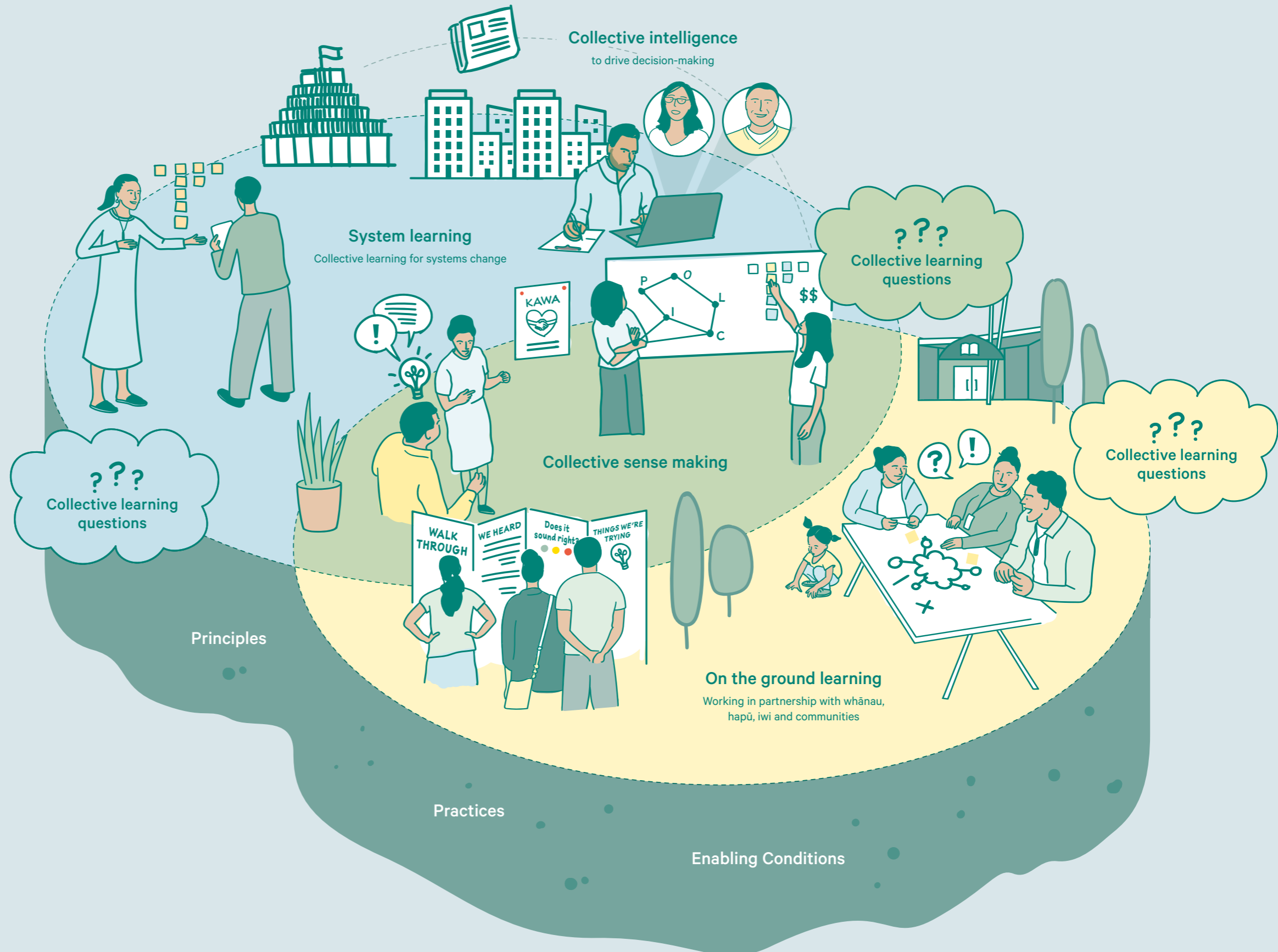
Guiding principles

- Te Tiriti as the foundation
- Equity and intergenerational wellbeing lens
- Supporting central government to work differently
- 'Ground-up' approach
- Values-based and relational
- Active involvement of whānau
- Learning by doing
- Multiple forms of evidence and ways of knowing
- Start small

Practices

- Development of shared kawa / principles / values
- Process and tools to generate actionable practice-based evidence
- Rhythm, learning loops
- Leadership and coordination
- Implementation learning opportunities

Enabling conditions

- Mandate and strategic opportunities
- Enabling senior leadership
- Permission to reconfigure resources
- Accountability geared toward learning
- Integrated policy implementation and learning activity

Collective intelligence
to drive decision-making

System learning
Collective learning for systems change

Collective learning questions

KAWA

Collective sense making

P O L I C

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WALK THROUGH WE HEARD Does it sound right? THINGS WE'RE TRYING

Principles

On the ground learning
Working in partnership with whānau, hapū, iwi and communities

Collective learning questions

Collective learning questions

Practices

Enabling Conditions

How we get there: core components of a learning system

The core components of a learning system outlined in the infographic above include:

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1.   Implementation learning on the ground and at system levels

This involves:

- Action learning in place to understand and evidence what matters and makes the difference to tamariki and their whānau, particularly those experiencing persistent disadvantage

- Disciplined learning at a system level to understand how we can re-engineer our policy and investment settings to enable more of what works (and to understand the ways in which our current ways of working might be entrenching inequity and keeping the status quo in place)

- Creating a dynamic way of learning that enables us to continue to improve and work smarter together across the system, in real time

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2.   Cohering collective learning questions

This involves:

- Building clarity and focus on the key questions we need to collectively grapple with at local and system levels to enable critical shifts towards a whānau centred, locally led and centrally enabled system

- Creating a discrete set of powerful questions to focus the learning effort. These learning questions reflect strategic priorities, are forward facing, action oriented and focus on our sphere of influence

- Gathering and synthesising evidence to help answer these questions over time though trying things in practice

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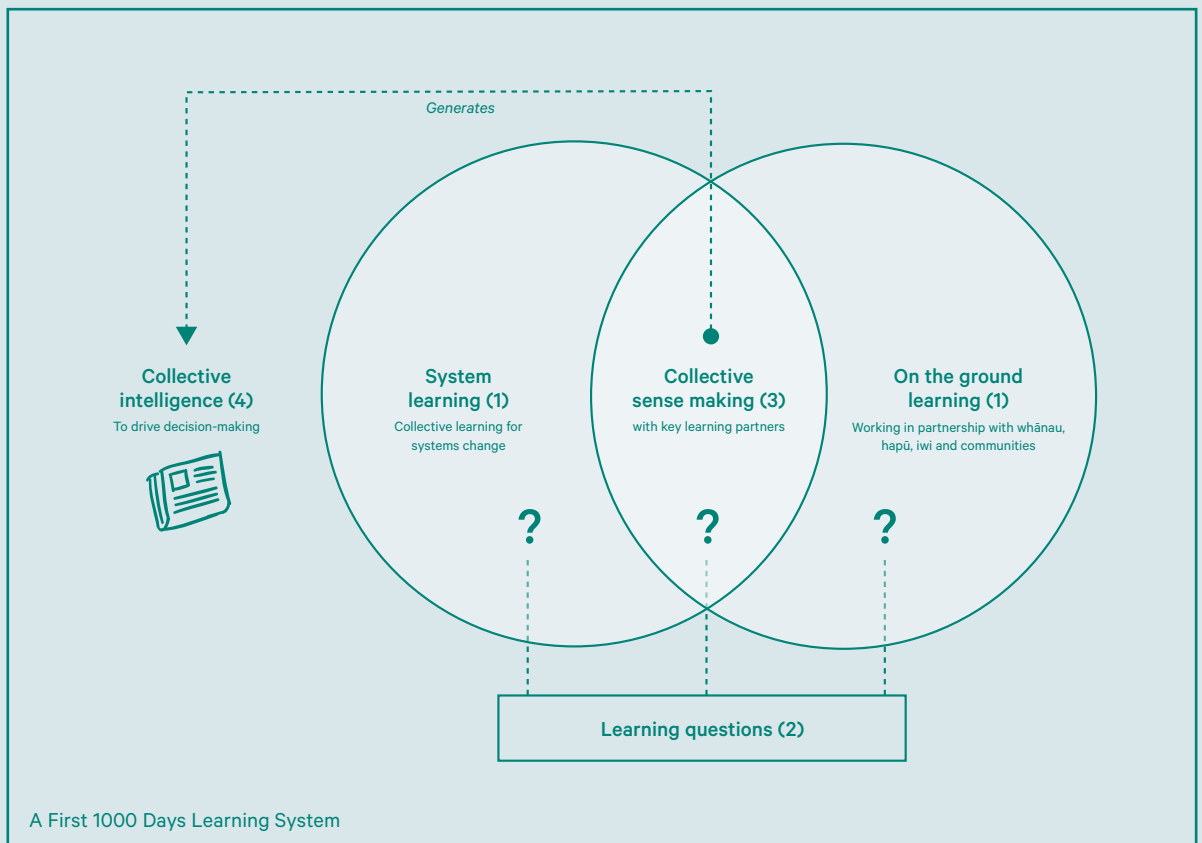### 3.   Collective sense making between communities and government

This involves:

- A process and framework for collective analysis and sense-making so we have a shared understanding of trends, insights, issues, practice-based evidence and implications

- Whānau, hapū, iwi and community leaders being actively involved in learning processes to help us reorientate around what matters and makes the biggest difference

- Two-way learning and accountability that enables meaningful opportunities for those working in 'place' to elevate what is being learned about what matters and makes the biggest difference, the barriers and enablers to progress being encountered – and for these to be prioritised with national policy, practice and investment work

- Establishing stronger mechanisms for those leading transformation efforts at central government level to be able to work alongside those closer to the reality on the ground

- Creating the space and capacity for diverse groups of people to pause, connect and develop new ways of working together – including reconfiguring existing resources in more effective ways.

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4.   Using this collective intelligence to drive decisions around where to next

This involves:

- Joining up what we are learning at community level about what matters and makes the biggest difference with decision making at central government level (e.g. the annual Budget process)

- Using this information to lift the quality of advice to Ministers and decision making forums such as the Social Wellbeing Board about what is needed and how to maximise the impact of collective efforts and resources.

Generates

Collective intelligence (4)
To drive decision-making

System learning (1)
Collective learning for systems change

Collective sense making (3)
with key learning partners

On the ground learning (1)
Working in partnership with whānau, hapū, iwi and communities

Learning questions (2)

A First 1000 Days Learning System

Practices needed to make a learning system work

A focus on practice development and how we go about bringing the core components and principles outlined above to life is critical to embedding new ways of working.

Some of the practices we have been cultivating with our partners include:

Development of shared kawa / principles / values

To hold us in relationship and enable a values-led approach

Processes and tools to generate actionable practice-based evidence

Tools and methods that enable disciplined learning (including those grounded in Mātauranga Māori)

Rhythm, learning loops

Establishing learning processes that support us to test and learn in short, manageable cycles

Reflective practice

Regular opportunities to fold in what we're learning

Leadership and coordination

Holding of relationships and the overarching process

Skilled facilitation

Space for safe and brave learning, grappling with the hard stuff

Implementation learning opportunities

At both on the ground and system levels so we can generate practice based evidence for what works

Example of a shared kawa that has been developed by Platform partners to hold us in relationship with each other on the journey

Tū Kotahi Standing together as one to achieve our purpose	**He Wāhi Whakaruruhau** *Space of protection*	Enabling a safe space where we can test and fail, move at pace, pivot, be bold and ambitious and vulnerable. A space that provides the conditions for action in complexity.
	Mahi Tahi / Tuhonohono *Collaborating / connecting and bonding*	Leveraging our collectivity for system change. Creating a network of peer support for this challenging mahi. Connecting to share knowledge, practice and tools we can use in our own spaces.
	Manawa roa *Building resilience*	Creating the space and relationships to support resilience for this mahi. This includes embracing the complexity of this work and systems, and holding each other in supportive relationship as we navigate the learning and we champion and demonstrate change together.
	Whakapiki Wairua *Uplifting the spirit*	Ensuring practices in this space that uplift mauri and wairua. This includes opportunities to energise through connections with te taiao and each other.
	Ako *Learning and sharing*	Learning together and from others. A space for sharing emerging tohu in our mahi, enabling collective sharing and developing the practice to operationalise the learning into system shifts. Ensuring matauranga-led approaches to curating this space and for evolving system change including maramataka.

Enabling conditions: things that can accelerate the journey

The following are conditions that we have noticed make a big difference to the success of learning system approaches. These conditions shape what is possible and set the focus of collective learning.

Mandate and strategic opportunities

For meaningful systems change

Enabling senior leadership

Leaders who create space for their people to work differently and support the development of a learning culture

Learning support

Engagement of agency agnostic learning partners / hoa haere to help capture and package learning and bring an inside / outside perspective

Permission to reconfigure resources

For greater impact

Accountability

Geared towards learning

Integrated policy implementation and learning activity

Instead of learning happening 'off to the side' and away from implementation decisions

Benefits of a learning system approach

Approached in this way, a learning system becomes a powerful intervention in itself, contributing to benefits such as:

- Agencies better understanding the unique role they can play in supporting whānau in the first 1000 days, and increased understanding and relationship to work that is happening beyond agency siloes

- Increased whanaungatanga and trust between key actors across the system (and between national, regional and local levels)

- Strengthened platforms for giving effect to te Tiriti that support government to reorient resource towards the aspirations of whānau, hapū and iwi

- Overcoming the historical divide between policy, strategy and implementation on the ground

- Increased understanding of key system 'pain points' and drivers that are contributing to entrenching inequity

- Understanding and being able to track our progress towards improved system stewardship

- Increased connectivity between the lived realities of whānau and community and central government policy and commissioning processes

- Freer flows of information and more diversity of perspectives and evidence involved in decision making processes

- The potential for more informed decisions at every level, leading to better use of finite resources

- Tangible ways to shift power towards people most impacted by persistent and intergenerational disadvantage

Steps you can take towards a First 1000 Days Learning System

What are the things we need to pay attention to, to make these kinds of shifts amidst the pressure and inertia of 'BAU'? What are the tangible next steps that will get us towards transformation?[1]

Progressing work towards enabling a First 1000 Days "system that learns" is one of our most important opportunities for being good ancestors and enacting responsible system stewardship. The legacy of taking these steps will have benefits for the approximately 60,000 tamariki born in Aotearoa each year, paying dividends in terms of their improved health and wellbeing both now and into the future.

Start small and demonstrate what it looks like in practice

This could include leveraging existing investments and infrastructure by engaging with partners around the country to galvanise the infrastructure and operating model for whānau centred, locally led, regionally supported and centrally enabled and use this learning to scale out new ways of working. We recommend exploring interest with the existing Place Based Initiatives, Regional Public Service Commissioners, hapū, iwi and potentially other motivated partners.

Specifically, we recommend starting by partnering with regions and rohe where child wellbeing has already been identified as a priority. This provides a practical way to model a more relational and bottom up approach from the outset.

Join the dots

Rather than establishing a separate and stand-alone learning system, explore how this work can meaningfully connect in and be part of the development of a learning system for Te Aorerekura, given supporting better outcomes in the early years has a critical role to play in eliminating family violence and sexual violence[2]. Build on the work already undertaken as part of the Early Years Implementation Learning Platform to start bringing together different agencies' system transformation efforts 'on the ground' in locality and at a systems level. Provide this cross-agency work a stronger mandate and human resourcing.

Develop a systemic Theory of Change

A systemic lens on this work is critical to avoiding a focus on the performance of discrete interventions and blindness to how our systems might be playing a role in constraining progress towards better outcomes. In the development of a First 1000 Days Learning System theory of change include a focus on changes needed in the way the system operates in the short, medium and longer term so we can start to track our progress towards realising our commitment to "centrally enabling an early years system that is whānau centred and locally led".

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1   The Southern Initiative and Auckland Co-design Lab (2022, August 7). Unleashing the potential of whānau centred and locally led ways of working. Child Youth and Wellbeing Strategy Review. Retrieved June 9, 2023, from https://www.aucklandco-lab.nz/reports-summary/unleashing-the-potential-of-whnau-centred-and-locally-led-ways-of-working

2   Te Puna Aonui (2021, December 7). Te Aorerekura National Strategy to Eliminate Family Violence and Sexual Violence. Medium. Retrieved June 9, 2023, from https://tepunaaonui.govt.nz/national-strategy/

Connect the learning system into refreshed governance arrangements for the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy arising from the 2022 Strategy review recommendations:

Explore how the learning system can directly feed into decision making happening within the evolving governance structures.

Consider how the learning system infrastructure can be sustainably embedded and resourced into the future

Realising the ambition of a First 1000 Days Learning System will take a concerted effort over time, which requires committing enduring resources for the infrastructure, capacity and capability needed. We recommend exploring partnerships with organisations outside of central government agencies who can help build capability and bring an 'inside/outside' perspective. This could include establishing or partnering with existing locally based learning/evidence units, to complement and work alongside centralised data and insights functions inside government (e.g. the Social Wellbeing Agency). We believe the resources required to operationalise a learning system approach for the First 1000 Days would offset over time through reduced duplication and increased efficiency achieved through the improved ways of working that the learning system will enable.

Appendix 1: Niho Taniwha

A framework for navigating complexity

We work to ensure that our innovation and design processes are also rigorous learning and evidence-building processes that reflect what matters to whānau and communities. To do this we have woven together an approach that draws upon te ao Māori and western knowledge, known as the Niho Taniwha.

Through the Niho Taniwha we:

- Foreground indigenous knowledge, place and lived experience

- Lead with values, principles and tikanga

- Act and learn together with whānau, community and systems partners

- Generate practice-based data and evidence

- Frame mahi in a complexity and systems transformation context

- Track what matters to whānau and communities

- Work to reverse engineer from what is working on the ground back into systems
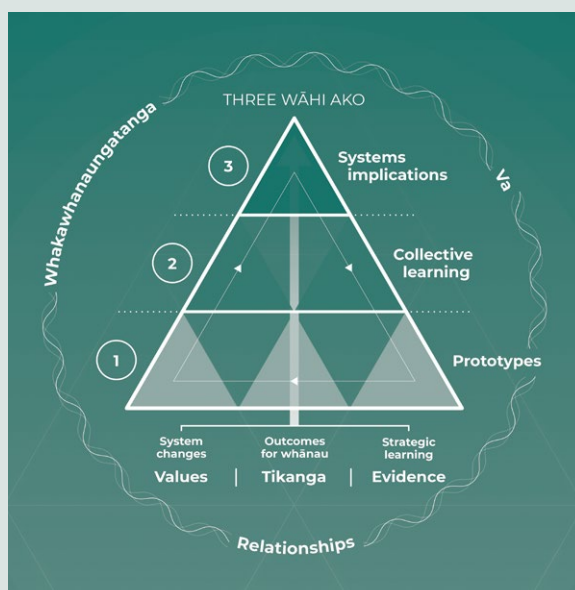
Visual of the Niho Taniwha learning framework

What is Niho Taniwha, how does it work?

Niho Taniwha is a values-led set of practices that weave learning and evaluation through the innovation process. It helps us to chart our paths, read tohu (signs), learn and adapt as we go.

It has been developed through work with whānau, communities and systems partners. It is grounded in Aotearoa and draws respectfully from mātauranga Māori. The Niho Taniwha pattern has a rich whakapapa in Aotearoa and across the Pacific and helps locate us in Tāmaki Makaurau today.

Niho Taniwha draws on western and indigenous practices of evaluation and learning including developmental evaluation (e.g., Patton et al., 2016; Gamble et al., 2021).

Our approach is increasingly guided by the knowledge of Pacific navigators as experts in complex wayfinding. We use the language of outcomes, indicators and systems change, but are more and more working with the language of navigation, wayfinding and tohu (signs) that help to mark and guide a tātou haerenga (our journey). Used in combination with Niho Taniwha, Hautū Waka (a wayfinding methodology presented to us by renowned tohunga and kaumātua Papa Rereata Mākiha) is enabling us to strengthen our approach to systems thinking, process design, reflection and evaluation.

The practice of navigation moves us away from terms like 'measures', which often don't connect to the things that are meaningful to whānau and communities (Gamble et al., 2019; Lowe and Plimmer, 2019), and towards directions, distance travelled and sensitivity to te Taiao (the environment). Niho Taniwha wraps around the innovation process, establishing the whāriki or foundation of values, tikanga (cultural protocols and practices) and evidence that informs the work. Evidence sources draw from mātauranga Māori, lived experience and western knowledge including research evidence and big data. Learning is captured throughout, guiding decision-making and action.

There are three interconnected Wāhi Ako or learning zones that help us to ladder outcomes and learning up and down between our collective moemoea (vision) and different initiatives and mahi on the ground:

Wāhi Ako Tuatahi: Zone 1 is the action and learning we can generate through a specific prototype or initiative in place

"Wāhi Ako Tuarua: Zone 2 is the learning process and questions that we are exploring collectively

Wāhi Ako Tuarua: Zone 3 brings all our learning together to help us consider the system implications and to retune our overall direction of travel and strategic intent

Relationships, whanaungatanga or the vā space guide and influence everything.

Regular reflection cycles involve learning and collective sense-making, complemented by bigger learning loops of reality testing or external evaluation. Reality testing gathers the perspectives of whānau, partners and stakeholders involved, testing our assumptions and surfacing outcomes and learning we might not know about.

As we track learning and outcomes within and across different levels of implementation, we pay attention to three things: outcomes for whānau, changes in the system and strategic learning. Together these form our emerging practice-based evidence (Cabaj 2019).

Niho Taniwha is supporting us to do three key things:

1. **Demonstrate compelling alternatives that start with place, whānau and community values.** We work with whānau to see what matters and makes a difference for them, starting from their aspirations and strengths. This flips usual public service approaches which often begin by agencies defining 'problems' about whānau. Instead of government holding all of the decision making power, power is more balanced and the mana of all is upheld.

2. **Build systems capability and readiness for working differently.** Working in partnership to test new things surfaces issues and real versus perceived blocks in systems. It reveals the readiness of organisations to work differently, what it actually takes to shift norms, mindsets and policy and starts to build this readiness. People experience what a different process looks and feels like and can take that learning into other settings.

3. **Produce practice-based evidence about what matters, what works and what is needed to improve local wellbeing and shift systems.** As an act of re-balancing we prioritise the lived experience and values of whānau, mātauranga Māori and other indigenous knowledge systems, alongside western knowledge and data. We create new 'ground-up' evidence through trying things together in place. This becomes a legitimate source of insight and evidence for systems change.
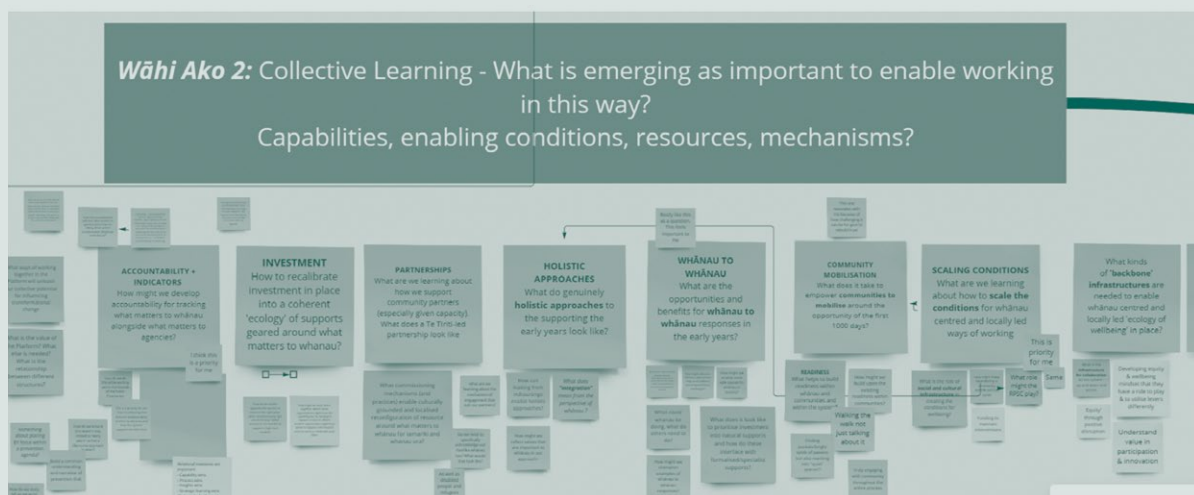

Example of the learning pātai generated as part of the platform

Why we developed Niho Taniwha

Niho Taniwha grew partly out of the necessity for tools and theories to address real life challenges that were grounded in a specific and evolving cultural context, and partly because of the limitations of existing evaluation frameworks and approaches. As we started on our journey to strengthen our evaluation practice it soon became evident that there was no 'one size fits all' approach to place-based evaluation and learning. Simply picking an evaluation approach 'off the shelf' would not be contextually or culturally compatible for our work in south Auckland. To develop practices that are responsive to our contexts and kaupapa, we have drawn on existing local and international practice and knowledge and nurtured our own practices and ways of working that best tautoko the mahi, the context, the people, the place and the system changes required.

We needed an approach that recognised and strengthened our existing whānau-led innovation practice while bringing a focus on learning and tracking outcomes in ways that would energise and accelerate this practice rather than constrain it. It was important that the learning approach was rigorous and robust, but also values-led, responsive to place and respectful of the diversity of different approaches and contexts of the work.

More information about Niho Taniwha, including the toolset to support its implementation, is available here: https://www.aucklandco-lab.nz/resources-summary/niho-taniwha
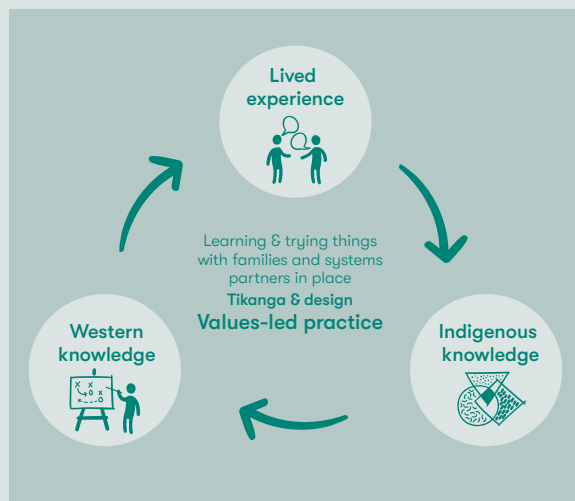
Our practice methodology

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If you would like to explore further please visit:

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