Briefing Note: Information on early learning provision on Great Barrier Island

To: Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education
Date: 15 November 2019
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Key Contact:

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No

Round Robin: No

Purpose of Report

This report responds to your request for supporting early childhood education on Aotea - Great Barrier Island and follows a request by the Aotea Education Trust to meet, which you declined.

Agree that this Briefing will be proactively released.

Agree / Disagree

Katrina Casey
Deputy Secretary
Sector Enablement and Support
15/11/2019

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education
22/11/19

I’d like further advice on whether the primary schools could offer an “ECE class” and what changes we would need to make to allow that to happen.
Background on Aotea - Great Barrier Island

1. Aotea - Great Barrier Island is the largest island off New Zealand’s North Island, with an area of 285 square kilometres. Nearly 60% of the island is public land, managed by the Department of Conservation or Auckland Council. Almost half of all dwellings are used only as holiday homes.

2. The population of Aotea - Great Barrier Island is distributed over a wide area with difficult terrain and driving conditions. There is no public transport. The island has six main settlements: Tryphena Harbour, Okupu, Whangaparapara, Port Fitzroy, Claris and Kaitoke. There are three primary schools, located near Port Fitzroy, Claris and Tryphena. The schools are rated decile 3 or 5.

3. 2013 census data shows the island has an overall population of 939, with a median age of 53.9 years. The island has a youth population (0 to 14 years) of 18% of which 51 children are aged 0-4 years.

Current early childhood education (ECE) services on the island

4. There is one licensed playcentre on the island operated by Te Whānau Tupu Ngātahi o Aotearoa – Playcentre Aotearoa. The playcentre is located in Claris, at the southern end of the island, adjacent to Kaitoke School. The playcentre is licensed for a maximum of 30 children, including up to 15 aged under two years and operates Tuesday and Friday from 10.30am to 1 pm, and Wednesday from 9.30am to 1.30pm.

5. In November 2017 the playcentre was assessed by ERO and received a rating of 'Well Placed' to promote positive learning outcomes for children. At the time of the ERO assessment the playcentre had 22 children attending.

6. There is one certificated playgroup, locate at the north end of the island. The North Barrier Playgroup operates in the Community Room at Okiwi School. The playgroup is certificated for a maximum of eight children, aged from 0-6 years. The playgroup is operating one session on a Thursday from 9.00am to 1.00pm.

7. Playcentres cater for children from birth to school age and are run cooperatively by parents and member families. Playcentre Aotearoa supports the service through governance and administration. Playgroups are community-based groups run by parent and whānau volunteers. To be a playgroup, more than half the children attending must have a parent there with them.

Aotea Education Trust

8. Aotea Education Trust (the Trust) was established in 2016 for the purpose of improving educational outcomes for residents on the island. The Trust provides study support to children aged 13-19 years and recently created the Aotea Learning Hub (the Hub), which is a physical space used by 20 secondary students who are enrolled in Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu.

9. Earlier this year the Ministry committed to funding a co-ordinator to work with students attending the Hub.

10. In 2018, Luke Coles, a member of the Great Barrier Island Local Board, wrote to the Ministry outlining a number of suggestions that he thought would improve ECE
delivery, including the use of Aotea Island Playcentre facilities, redistribution of school property and potential use of Ministry land.

11. In 2018 the Trust engaged a consultant to complete an area feasibility and implementation plan to better understand educational needs. This work included a parent survey that received 32 responses. Key findings presented to the Trust in July 2018 were:
   a. Parents wanted early learning provision that is not parent-led, and operates five days a week as a drop-off service.
   b. There are no qualified, registered ECE teachers on Great Barrier Island.
   c. Average incomes on the island are lower than on mainland New Zealand generally. Survey respondents indicated they were willing to contribute $5 or $6 per hour for early learning services.
   d. The majority of survey participants were not willing to use their own homes to create a home-based early learning service.

Options

Establish a teacher-led ECE service

12. We recognise that many parents prefer a teacher-led ECE service. The current playcentre and playgroup require parental involvement, which does not suit some families, particularly if parents have work requirements.

13. All ECE service providers operate independently of the Ministry, either as commercial businesses or one of various types of not-for-profit organisations. While the Ministry can provide financial assistance in establishing an ECE service, the service must be financial sustainable. It is important that parents and caregivers have confidence that their children are learning in a safe, well-run early learning service.

14. For the majority of ECE services financial sustainability is a mix of government funding and parent or community contribution. Government funding subsidises the cost of ECEs and although there are additional subsidies available, including isolation funding, these subsidies do not cover the full cost of operating a service.

15. While every ECE service is different, the small and geographically spread population on the island, coupled with the limited potential for parental financial contributions, is likely to mean a single teacher-led ECE service is not financially viable.

16. The presence of a single teacher-led ECE service on the island is likely to only serve a small population, further reducing the financial viability. The population of the island is distributed over a wide area with difficult terrain, driving conditions and no public transport. Parents in the northern part of the island are unlikely to drive significant kilometres to attend a teacher-led ECE service in the south, or vice versa.

17. Any possible teacher-led ECE service may struggle to attract qualified and registered ECE teachers. A teacher would need to reside on the island as travel by air or ferry would be challenging. Replacement teachers would be required to cover leave, non-contact time or leave for professional development. This is further complicated if ratio requirements necessitated more than one teacher.
Expand the current playcentre/playgroup

18. The current playcentre on the island is not fully utilised, operating two short sessions of two and half hours and one four hour session. Sessions could be expanded or additional sessions started. We also understand the playcentre has attendance capacity. Alternatively, the opening of other playcentres closer to population settlements could reduce travel times. Grant funding is available to assist playcentres.

19. However, the playcentre model still requires parents to be present and involved.

Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu

20. ECE is provided through Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu, which offers a free service with individualised programmes for children aged 0-6 years by correspondence. This option has previously been discussed with the Trust. However, as the preference is for teacher-led ECE they have been reluctant to explore this to date.

Regulatory change

21. Mr Coles has suggested that licensing regulations should be relaxed on Great Barrier Island due to its unique character. The Auckland Council has also asked whether there is any ministerial discretion.

22. There is no ministerial discretions within the Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations to relax any of the minimum requirements. To do so would effectively create a two tier ECE environment that would be confusing for parents and providers.

Next Steps

23. We have an ongoing dialogue open with members of Aotea Education Trust and local Board. We agree with the Trust that, at this stage, none of the options are viable or sustainable. We continue to work with the Trust and promote extant ECE services.

Proactive Release

24. We recommend that this Briefing is proactively released as per your expectation that information be released as soon as possible. Any information which may need to be withheld will be done so in line with the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982.