

IN-CONFIDENCE

Office of the Minister of Social Development and Employment
Social Wellbeing Committee

Confirming the scope of Community Connectors beyond 1 October 2023

Proposal

1. This paper seeks Cabinet agreement to the scope for the Community Connector workforce from 1 October 2023.

Relation to government priorities

2. This paper aligns with the Government's priority to lay the foundations for the future. Two important parts of this are to work towards a more effective social service sector by improving how government commissions and works with social service providers; and to ensure our emergency management systems are geared towards an inclusive, community-led response to natural disasters and health events.

Executive Summary

3. Community Connectors, (Connectors) employed by non-government organisations, walk alongside individuals, families and whānau, providing advice and support, and advocating for them until they are connected with relevant supports. They have been an important part of the Government response to both COVID-19 and recent extreme weather events in the North Island.
4. 500 Connector full-time equivalent positions (FTE) are funded until 1 July 2023 through the COVID-19 Care in the Community (CiC) welfare response. Through Budget 2023 and the North Island Weather Events Omnibus Budget package, Cabinet agreed to fund a total of 165 Connector FTEs from 1 July 2023, with this reducing to 100 Connector FTEs from 1 July 2024. 65 of these Connectors will be in weather-impacted regions, funded for one year, while the additional 100 will be nationwide, for two years.
5. Following these Budget 2023 outcomes, myself and the Minister of Finance agreed to a transition plan which continues contracts for all 500 Connector FTEs from 1 July 2023 until 30 September 2023 and to maintain Connectors' current scope through this transition period.
6. Beyond this period, I recommend that Cabinet agree that from 1 October 2023 the scope for the Connectors' workforce is to provide short-term support to individuals, families and whānau, to prevent and minimise the impacts of hardship. This broad scope includes, but does not limit them to, being able to

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support individuals, families and whānau who have been impacted by the January floods, Cyclone Gabrielle or COVID-19.

7. Following Cabinet's agreement to these proposals, the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) will communicate this new scope with Connector providers before the beginning of July 2023 in line with the agreed transition plan.

Background

8. Connectors are funded by government and employed by non-government organisations to walk alongside individuals, families and whānau, providing short term support and connecting them with relevant services. Connectors are able to respond to individual needs of a family, which can include welfare and food support, social and mental health services and employment. Each Connector has access to discretionary funding to help households meet urgent wellbeing needs.
9. 500 Community Connector FTEs are funded until the end of the 2022/2023 financial year through the CiC response.

Connectors have responded to both COVID-19 and extreme weather

10. Connectors have worked to help minimise and protect New Zealanders from the impacts of COVID-19 and extreme weather. Between 3 December 2021 and 7 May 2023, Connectors have supported 218,916 households while self-isolating with COVID-19, as well as a further 80,137 households not in self-isolation.
11. Connectors have provided a broad range of supports to households. This has included, among other roles:
 - 11.1 facilitating direct food support through the Food Secure Communities initiative
 - 11.2 helping people access physical and mental healthcare
 - 11.3 assisting with urgent financial needs such as rent arrears
 - 11.4 connecting households to longer-term community-led supports
 - 11.5 advocating for whānau with government agencies, and
 - 11.6 providing holistic social advice to households.

The future of the Connector role has been confirmed through Budget 2023 decisions

12. 65 Connectors have been funded through the North Island Weather Event Omnibus Budget process through to the end of the 2023/2024 financial year in regions impacted by the January floods and Cyclone Gabrielle. This is in addition to 100 Connectors funded through Budget 2023 till the end of the

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2024/25 financial year nationwide. In total, 165 Connectors will be funded from 1 October 2023, with this reducing to 100 FTE from 1 July 2024.

13. The Budget 2023 Bid sought funding for Connectors “to provide short-term support to individuals, families and whānau who require early engagement to prevent and minimise the impacts of hardship or harm”. It was agreed that I would report back to Cabinet to confirm the change in scope.

The scope of Connectors from 1 July 2023 to 30 September 2023 has been confirmed by Joint Ministers through a transition plan

14. Given the scale and importance of the Connector role over the past three years, I considered that dropping from 500 Connectors to 165 on 1 July 2023 could negatively impact their ability to reach those who need support. This includes supporting people who face societal and structural barriers to access support from government, worsening outcomes for those who most need support.
15. To mitigate this, in May 2023, myself and the Minister of Finance agreed to a transition plan which continues contracts for all 500 Community Connector FTEs from 1 July 2023 until 30 September 2023 (“the transition period”). This was communicated to Connectors on 16 May 2023. This is in line with Cabinet’s agreement in October 2022 to delegate decisions regarding CiC support to myself and the Minister of Finance [CAB-22-MIN-0443 refers].
16. This supports the transition to 165 FTE from 1 October 2023, allowing for a more gradual reduction of support and helps maintain relationships with social sector partners. Without a sufficient transition period, some contracts could abruptly end, which would negatively impact those who Connectors have supported. This simple, one step and relational approach balances the funding available, fair notice periods and allows for regional decision making.
17. This transition will also allow time for MSD to ensure continuity of service for individuals, families and whānau through the transition period. It also allows MSD to work with social sector organisations to assist in re-employing Connectors into other vacant roles across the sector, by working in collaboration with other government agencies where workforce funding may be available. This transition is estimated to cost \$10.05 million. The funding for this will primarily be covered by the \$9.9 million available for transition funding already agreed by myself and the Minister of Finance, and the first three months of funding for the continuing 165 Connector FTE. The difference between the available \$9.9 million and \$10.05 million will be managed through natural workforce attrition in this transition period.
18. The scope of Connectors for the transition period has also been agreed by myself and the Minister of Finance. We agreed to maintain Connectors’ current scope through the transition period: to support people impacted by COVID-19, and people impacted by recent North Island weather events.
19. MSD will work closely with Connector providers to support them with transition planning and through the transition period from 1 July, including, where

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possible, supporting impacted FTEs into other employment prior to the FTE reduction on 1 October 2023.

The ongoing scope of Connectors beyond the transition period now needs to be confirmed, in line with Budget 2023 decisions

20. Beyond the transition period, the scope of Connectors needs to be confirmed by Cabinet because their purpose will no longer be centred on responding to COVID-19.
21. I recommend that from 1 October 2023 the scope for the Connectors' workforce is to provide short-term support to individuals, families and whānau, to prevent and minimise the impacts of hardship.
22. In line with Budget 2023 decisions, Connectors will continue to have access to discretionary funding. This amount will be reduced, from their current average of approximately \$120 per household, to approximately \$46 per household. Given their purpose will no longer be centred on responding to COVID-19, and fewer people will require support while in lockdown or isolation, I anticipate that less discretionary funding will be required, as other supports are more readily available.
23. Connectors will be able to support a total of approximately 124,000 households in the 2023/2024 financial year (including the transition period, during which 500 FTE will be contracted), and 50,000 households in the 2024/2025 financial year.
24. Connectors will continue to use existing networks to reach out to the individuals, families and whānau who require their support. Social sector organisations, community groups, churches, marae, iwi, sports clubs, schools and workplace connections will continue to be leveraged in order to reach people who may not want to or be able to access traditional or government support.
25. By nature of being embedded in the community, and with strong informal networks, I anticipate that Connectors will be particularly focused on supporting those who are less likely to directly access government services and supports. This can be for a variety of reasons including institutional mistrust and structural, physical, financial and cultural barriers. Connectors are therefore particularly able to support people who would otherwise be unlikely to access support. The primary aim of the Connector role will be to walk alongside individuals, families and whānau, advocating for them until they are connected with supports and services that work for them.
26. The hardship that Connectors will help to minimise includes financial hardship, but also includes those who would benefit from social sector supports to meet broader needs. This includes ensuring people can access physical and mental health services, supporting direct provision of food, assisting access to culturally appropriate services such as kaupapa Māori supports, and helping people to access employment.

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27. This scope is deliberately broad, as a key benefit of the Connector role has been the ability to reach people for whom traditional or government social supports are ineffective due to strict criteria. Keeping the scope broad will allow Connectors to continue to leverage this benefit and continue to support those most in need. This includes, for instance, community-led assistance of people who are in employment but are struggling financially, and who do not want to or cannot directly access government financial support.

This proposed scope also allows continued support in recovery from both COVID-19 and extreme weather events

28. Under this broad scope, Connectors will also continue to provide community-led support to people who are in hardship due to COVID-19, as our recovery from the pandemic continues. This will include supporting those who are self-isolating and may be in hardship or have additional complexity in their lives.
29. Connectors have played an important role in supporting households who have been impacted by the January floods and Cyclone Gabrielle. This has included facilitating direct food support through the Food Secure Communities initiative, helping people access physical and mental healthcare, and helping people to access Civil Defence payments. Therefore, I propose that, under this broad scope, Connectors will also continue to support people in regions impacted by flooding and Cyclone Gabrielle.

Connectors are an example of the Government's Social Sector Commissioning approach

30. In November 2021, the Social Wellbeing Committee agreed to adopt Social Sector Commissioning, a relational approach to commissioning, and a foundational shift for government departments across the social sector [SWC-21-MIN-0173 refers].¹
31. The Connector role is an example of this Social Sector Commissioning approach and embodies several principles of the approach². For example, Connectors help ensure that Individuals, families, whānau and communities are able to exercise choice, by government working collaboratively with community providers and whānau to ensure that communities can access support in a way that works for them.

Connectors will continue to work alongside other navigator-type functions

32. The Connector workforce remains a broad, short-term focused support, which focuses on using lived experience and/ or community understanding to help New Zealanders. This is different to other social sector workforces, which often require certain skills and deal with specific issues.
33. Since their establishment in July 2020, Connectors have worked alongside other government-funded navigator-type functions, including Housing

¹

²¹ Social Sector Commissioning 2022-2028 Action Plan, Ministry of Social Development, 2022

² *ibid*

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Navigators, Enabling Good Lives Kaitūhono, and Whānau Ora Navigators. Connectors can often help by referring individuals, families and whānau to these more specific, long-term roles.

34. Connectors will continue to focus on providing short-term support, addressing immediate challenges to wellbeing, and supporting people into longer-term support where necessary. Consultation between MSD and providers has found that these other type of navigator roles are much longer-term in nature, narrower in the support they can provide, and are complementary to Connectors, rather than competing or overlapping.
35. To ensure that these complementary roles remain most effective, Connectors will continue to work with the staff in these roles, many of whom are employed by the same organisations as Connectors are. Due to their broad-in-scope, short term, 'sort and support' nature, Connectors will often be the first point of contact for whānau, who can then, if necessary, be referred on to more specialist roles. Connectors will continue utilising their lived experience, including experience of community support, to assist people. This contrasts other roles which may require particular training and qualifications due to their specificity.

A reduced Connector workforce will support people in a number of ways, but will be less able to respond to new priorities

36. Due to the decrease in Connector FTEs from 1 October 2023, the ongoing Connector model will differ from its current state. While Connectors will have flexibility to shift to local and regional priorities as they emerge, their capacity to shift to new urgent national priorities, such as future outbreaks of infectious diseases, will be limited. In the case of such an event, I will seek further advice from officials.
37. MSD Regional Commissioners and social sector providers will continue to work together as partners, as they have under the CiC model, to determine local and regional priorities with Connectors.

MSD will use insights to determine the new regional allocation for Connectors

38. Connectors will continue to be located in regions where the need for community-led social support is highest, based on information from MSD Regional teams, data from the Social Wellbeing Agency's (SWA) Community Insights tool, and the ongoing need for support in recovery from the January floods and Cyclone Gabrielle.
39. Regional allocation of Connectors will continue to be an operational decision by MSD, in consultation with Regional Commissioners, iwi, other government agencies and social sector providers. The below regional allocation is indicative of where Connectors could be based from 1 October 2023. This is yet to be confirmed, following discussions with MSD Regional Commissioners and providers.

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Region	Existing FTE (500)	Proposed allocation of 65 from NIWE	Proposed allocation of 100 from Budget 23	Combined total	Reduction of FTE from 1 October 2023
Northland	45	9	9	18	-27
Auckland West	36	7	6	13	-23
Auckland Central	46	6	4	10	-36
Auckland South	89	20	20	40	-49
Waikato	39	6	9	15	-24
Bay of Plenty	44	4	9	13	-31
East Coast	33	11	10	21	-12
Taranaki, King Country, Whanganui	33	-	5	5	-28
Central	28	2	8	10	-18
Wellington	25	-	6	6	-19
Nelson, Marlborough, West Coast	21	-	3	3	-18
Canterbury	32.25	-	5	5	-27.25
Southern	33	-	6	6	-27

Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of Connectors remains important

40. MSD will continue to provide me with reporting on the number of households supported by Connectors, the discretionary funding used, the source of referral to Connectors, and the location and ethnicity of supported households.
41. I note that findings of an outcomes-focused evaluation of the CiC welfare response to COVID-19, including the outcomes achieved by Connectors, is underway and findings are expected in December 2023.
42. MSD will provide a report to myself and the Minister of Finance by November 2024 on implementation, impacts and outcomes of the Connector programme. This will inform any potential future investment decisions.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi implications

43. Connectors have contributed to upholding the government's Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations. The implications of the Connector programme for Te

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Tiriti have been considered in line with Cabinet Office circular CO 19(5)³ and delineated by the articles of Te Tiriti.

Article one – Kawanatanga

44. This proposal assists the Crown in honouring its kawanatanga obligations by ensuring that a community workforce remains available for people who have complex life situations, and for whom core government services are ineffective.
45. Given the focus on supporting Māori providers and communities, this proposal has particular implications for providers of Whānau Ora, an important by Māori, for Māori initiative. MSD recommend that providers of both initiatives continue to have the flexibility to manage their funding in a way that makes sense for their organisation and communities and helps minimise any gaps in other roles in their organisations. The allocation of Community Connectors will also continue to prioritise providers in Māori, Pacific, ethnic communities, seniors, and disabled people, and consider where the need for community support is greatest.

Article two – Tino Rangatiratanga

46. This proposal supports tino rangatiratanga, protects Māori interests, and allows for Māori retention of decision-making in relation to them through:
 - 46.1 MSD Regional Commissioners partnering with Māori organisations with Connectors, through wānanga and through other existing forums, to understand how the Connector role is working and resolve local issues, and collaborate on new, more whānau centred models of service delivery
 - 46.2 supporting iwi and Māori social services to manage their own affairs, particularly through priority funding and a flexible contract
 - 46.3 engaging and coordinating across the government at regional and national levels to ensure that the Connector function complements broader efforts underway between Māori and the Crown to improve outcomes for Māori, mitigating any risks or unintended consequences.

Article three – Ōritetanga

47. This proposal contributes to ōritetanga by promoting equitable outcomes for Māori in the community-led social sector. As outlined in a number of previous inquiries and reports, Māori have experienced inequity in social outcomes as a result of failures of the Crown to uphold its Treaty obligations⁴. Equity of social outcomes is dependent on the provision of both government services and kaupapa Māori social services. As outlined by the Waitangi Tribunal, the

³ CO (19) 5: Te Tiriti o Waitangi / Treaty of Waitangi Guidance, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2022

⁴ Haumaru: The COVID-19 Priority Report, Waitangi Tribunal, 2022; He Whakamana Tangata, Welfare Expert Advisory Group, 2018; WAI 2750 - Housing Policy and Services Inquiry, 2019

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Crown is responsible for ensuring Māori are not disadvantaged by their choice of service, and any option which is offered should be well supported⁵.

48. Connectors will continue to prioritise allocation to Māori social service organisations, to ensure Māori whānau have greater choice to access support both through core government services and through Māori social service organisations.

Implementation

49. Following confirmation of these proposals, MSD will communicate with social sector providers, iwi, Regional Commissioners, and other community partners before 1 July 2023.

Implementation timeline

50. Connectors will continue with their current scope until 1 July 2023. From 1 July 2023 until 30 September 2023, all 500 Connectors will continue their role in line with the agreed transition period scope.
51. On 1 October 2023, 335 contracts will end, and 165 Connectors will continue with the scope agreed to by Cabinet. On 1 July 2024, 65 contracts will end, and 100 Connectors will continue their role in line with the scope agreed in this paper.
52. On 1 July 2025, the remaining 100 contracts will end, at which point the service will cease unless there is further investment.

Financial Implications

53. There are no direct financial implications of the proposals in this paper. These proposals follow and are in line with Budget 2023 and North Island Weather Events Omnibus Budget package decisions.

Legislative Implications

54. There are no legislative implications associated with the proposals in this paper.

Regulatory Impact Statement

55. A Regulatory Impact Statement is not required for the proposals in this paper.

Climate Implications of Policy Assessment

56. A Climate Implications of Policy Assessment is not required for this proposal, as it does not include decreasing greenhouse gas emissions as a key policy objective and is unlikely to have a direct emissions impact.

⁵ ibid

Population Implications

57. Connectors have been employed by, and worked closely with, providers who focus on meeting the social needs of many groups, including Māori, Pacific, ethnic, and disabled communities, disabled people, youth, and seniors. Meeting the needs of these population groups will continue to be important in the future of the Connector role.
58. As we transition our social services away from a focus on COVID-19, it is important to recognise that the burden of COVID-19 does not fall equally, and some people are at higher risk of adverse health outcomes from the virus. For example, while age is the strongest predictor of population-based COVID-19 risk, analysis from the Ministry of Health⁶ suggests there is also higher risk of COVID-19 mortality for Māori, Pacific peoples, and disabled people. Our remaining COVID-19 response measures, including seven-day isolation for cases, will continue to recognise this.
59. Our social services also do not always meet the needs of all population groups. For instance, Māori are often disproportionately represented among those with poor social outcomes⁷. A social sector that focuses on strengths, rather than deficits alone, is necessary in order for communities to create change for themselves. This can be achieved by working with a wide range of social sector organisations that build on these strengths, including Connector providers. The allocation of Connectors will continue to prioritise providers who support Māori, Pacific, ethnic communities, seniors, and disabled communities and consider where the need for community support is greatest.
60. This proposal may also have implications for disabled people and tāngata whaikaha Māori. The Independent Monitoring Mechanism has recommended the government “ensure tāngata whaikaha Māori and their representative groups are part of the decision making processes in all phases (preparing, planning, execution, and recovery) of emergency responses”⁸. The continuation of Community Connectors supports tāngata whaikaha Māori and disabled people to access appropriate community-based support in a way that works for them.

Human Rights

61. The proposals in this paper are consistent with the Human Rights Act 1993 and the Bill of Rights Act 1990.
62. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities⁹, which New Zealand has signed and ratified, promotes, protects and ensures the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all disabled people, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. The continuation of Community Connector support plays a key role in ensuring

⁶ COVID-19 Mortality in Aotearoa New Zealand: Inequities in Risk, 2022; COVID-19 Risk Among Disabled People, 2022

⁷ Haumaru: The COVID-19 Priority Report, Waitangi Tribunal, 2022; More effective social services, Productivity Commission, 2015

⁸ Making Disability Rights Real in a Pandemic, Independent Monitoring Mechanism, 2021

⁹ See article 14

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disabled people and tāngata whaikaha Māori can access appropriate community-based support in a way that works for them, including in the recovery from COVID-19, the January floods, and Cyclone Gabrielle.

Consultation

63. In preparing this paper, the Ministry of Social Development consulted with Te Puni Kōkiri, the Ministry of Health, Whaikaha – Ministry of Disabled People, the Ministry for Pacific Peoples, the Ministry for Ethnic Communities, and Treasury. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet were informed.

Communications

64. Following confirmation of these proposals, MSD will communicate with social sector providers, iwi, Regional Commissioners, and other community partners before 1 July 2023.

Proactive Release

65. This Cabinet paper will be proactively released and published online in line with standard timeframes of within 30 business days of final decisions being taken by Cabinet, with redactions applied in accordance with the Official Information Act 1982.

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Recommendations

The Minister for Social Development and Employment recommends that the Social Wellbeing Committee:

1. **note** that 500 Community Connector FTEs are funded until the end of the 2022/2023 financial year through the Care in the Community response
2. **note** the scope of Community Connectors is currently to support people impacted by COVID-19, and people impacted by recent North Island weather events
3. **note** that Cabinet agreed to fund 100 Community Connector FTEs until the end of the 2024/2025 financial year through Budget 2023, and a further 65 Community Connector FTEs in regions impacted by January flooding and Cyclone Gabrielle until the end of the 2023/2024 financial year
4. **note** that in May 2023 the Minister for Social Development and Employment and the Minister of Finance agreed to a transition plan which continues contracts and maintains the current scope for all 500 Community Connector FTEs from 1 July 2023 until 30 September 2023
5. **note** that Cabinet agreement is required for the scope of Community Connectors from 1 October 2023
6. **agree** that from 1 October 2023 the scope for Community Connectors is to provide short-term support to individuals, families and whānau, to prevent and minimise the impacts of hardship

AGREE / DISAGREE

7. **note** that this scope includes Community Connectors providing a broad range of supports, including ensuring people can access physical and mental health services, supporting direct provision of food, assisting access to culturally appropriate services such as kaupapa Māori supports, and helping people to access employment
8. **note** that this broad scope will allow Community Connectors to continue supporting individuals, families and whānau who have been impacted by the January floods, Cyclone Gabrielle, or COVID-19
9. **note** that while Community Connectors will have flexibility to shift to local and regional priorities as they emerge, their capacity to respond to new urgent national priorities will be limited
10. **note** that Ministry of Social Development Regional Commissioners and social sector providers will continue to work together as partners to determine regional priorities with Connectors
11. **note** that placement of Community Connector FTE is subject to insights from across government, and discussions with Ministry of Social Development Regional Commissioners, iwi, and social sector providers

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12. **note** that an outcomes-focused evaluation of the Care in the Community welfare response to COVID-19, including outcomes achieved by Community Connectors, is underway, and findings are expected in December 2023
13. **note** the Ministry of Social Development will provide a report to the Minister for Social Development and Employment and the Minister of Finance by November 2024 on implementation, impacts and outcomes of the Community Connector programme, which will inform any future investment decisions

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Carmel Sepuloni

Minister for Social Development and Employment

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