



BRIEFING

to the Minister for Senior Citizens

Hon John Carter

from

Age Concern New Zealand
He Manaakitanga Kaumatua Aotearoa

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Age Concern is committed to serving the needs of older people, koroua and kuia. Through a national office and a nationwide federation of 34 members, branches and associates, we provide services, information and advocacy to older people in response to local needs. We are active and vocal on issues affecting older people, taking every opportunity to work towards our vision of an inclusive society where older people are respected, valued, supported and empowered.

The aim of this Briefing paper is threefold:

to alert the Minister to key issues for older New Zealanders

to explain what Age Concern is doing to make a difference

to encourage the Minister to support us in our work for older people.

Part 1

THE BIG FOUR: ATTITUDES, CHRONIC LONELINESS, INCOME AND HEALTH

Responding to what older people are telling us, Age Concern New Zealand is currently active on **four main policy fronts**. We are working to change **attitudes** to older people and to combat **chronic loneliness**. We are working to ensure that older people have an adequate **income** and access to the **health care** they need.

1.1 Attitudes to older people need to change

The issues as we see them

At the age of 83, Sister Loyola Galvin began to set up a community garden for apartment dwellers with no space of their own. At the age of 101, Tom McKay still works in the Dargaville business he founded 60 years ago. At the age of 102, Eric King-Turner ventured to emigrate from England to start a new life in New Zealand.

These three people all made the headlines in the last few months because their attitudes and actions provide us with clear examples of what Professor Mason Durie calls “the social and cultural capital” that makes ageing an “asset” to society. Yet the reality is that the value of the asset that Sister Loyola, Tom McKay and Eric King-Turner represent is often completely overlooked, and is rarely used as a counterweight to the much publicised and oft-measured *costs* of ageing. Headlines such as these quickly give way to the perception, predominant in too many sectors, that older people are a burden. This perception lies at the heart of ageism, breeding negative attitudes which can very easily lead to elder abuse and neglect.

In response to the Age Concern New Zealand Survey of Political Parties earlier this year, the National Party observed that “you can measure a society by how it looks after its most vulnerable citizens”. Age Concern concurs wholeheartedly.

Sadly, we also have first-hand evidence that New Zealanders don't always measure up. Age Concern Elder Abuse and Neglect Prevention Services receive, on average, **two cases of verified elder abuse every working day**. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. International prevalence estimates suggest that up to 50,000 older New Zealanders are being subjected to abuse or neglect. Abuse and neglect can have wide-ranging and long-term effects on an older person's physical and mental health, on their finances, living arrangements and family/whānau/aiga relationships.

We need to strengthen our collective response to elder abuse to ensure all members of families and whānau have healthy, respectful, stable relationships, free from violence.

The **quality of care in rest homes** is also of constant concern, coupled with the fact that those who look after our 'most vulnerable citizens' do so for the minimum wage. How do we measure a society where picking fruit is seen to have more value than looking after an older person?

Changing ageist attitudes is the first step to improving the quality of care of older people and preventing all forms of elder abuse and neglect. Paradoxically, it is also a means of reducing some of the costs of ageing, for negative attitudes generate their own costs. Elder abuse in particular costs our country through increased spending in health services, through reduced participation of older people in communities and increased poverty. Moreover, research has proven that negative stereotypes and 'internalised' ageism can undermine an older person's confidence, memory and ability to recover from illness.

It follows, then, that the more we value the 'cultural and social capital' that older people represent, the more we will reduce the costs associated with ageing.

What is Age Concern doing?

Elder Abuse and Neglect Prevention

Age Concern has been active in preventing elder abuse and neglect in New Zealand for 20 years and is the largest provider of elder abuse and neglect prevention services in the country. Of the 25 Elder Abuse and Neglect Prevention services operating in New Zealand, 19 are run by Age Concerns, with Age Concern New Zealand providing support and coordination to all 25 services. The services provide free and confidential support, advocacy and information for people facing elder abuse. Services also offer education for people working with and caring for older people, and public awareness-raising activities aimed at early identification and prevention of elder abuse or neglect.

Each year Age Concern New Zealand and local Age Concerns mark World Elder Abuse Awareness Day with powerful awareness-raising campaigns, the most recent of which have centred upon the importance of respect – respect not neglect, respect not threats. Respect is the key to ending elder abuse and neglect.

Age Concern New Zealand is also taking the lead in long-term planning to prevent elder abuse and neglect. We have a Memorandum of Understanding

with the Older People's Policy Team at the Ministry of Social Development to work in partnership to develop priorities for action on elder abuse and neglect prevention. A joint paper has been prepared which is being presented to the Taskforce for Action on Violence within Families on Wednesday 10 December. This work is being managed in a very collaborative manner with mutual benefit to both Age Concern New Zealand and MSD and good engagement with relevant departments across government.

Quality of residential care

Age Concern New Zealand has been calling for DHB audits of rest homes to be made public. When this happens, we plan to provide links to the audit report summaries from our website and, more importantly, we wish to provide guidance to older people and their families on how to interpret the reports.

Changing ageist attitudes – the Age Concern New Zealand Patron's Award

In July 2007, Age Concern New Zealand produced a training/awareness-raising DVD entitled *It's All About Respect*. The message in that title has since become our mantra. As part of our drive to encourage respect and positive attitudes, Age Concern New Zealand has launched the Patron's Award. The Award is aimed at encouraging New Zealand journalists, media and public relations companies, and advertising agencies to use their skills to change attitudes to older people for the better. They have until July 2009 to enter a piece of work which fosters positive attitudes to older people, and the winner will be announced on 1 October 2009 as part of our annual celebration of the International Day of Older Persons.

What actions can the Minister for Senior Citizens take?

Help prevent elder abuse and neglect by:

- funding Age Concern to fill the geographical gaps in the Elder Abuse and Neglect Prevention Service (gaps include: Far North; Rodney; Thames-Coromandel; Bay of Plenty; Rotorua; Marlborough; Ashburton; Greymouth-Hokitika)
- requesting regular reports on the work being carried out by Age Concern New Zealand and MSD.

Help change ageist attitudes and behaviours by:

- supporting the Age Concern New Zealand Patron's Award

- calling for more action on Goal 8 of the Positive Ageing Strategy – current action on this goal is lamentable.

Help improve the quality of residential care by:

- requesting regular updates on the audit process.

1.2 Chronic Loneliness – a silent epidemic that must be taken seriously

The issues as we see them

Chronic loneliness and social isolation, like ageist attitudes, have severe health and social consequences for older people. Research shows links between chronic loneliness and cardiovascular disease; Alzheimer's disease; depression; overall physical and mental health and the ability of an older person to remain independent and age in the community.

Given these links, it is easy to see that taking action to combat loneliness will support older people to age in good health and to remain in their communities. This will in turn reduce costs to Government and to the community. The costs of not taking action would be high: the Positive Ageing Indicators 2007 showed that 15% of people over 65 experienced loneliness and social isolation in 2006. This means that 76,000 older New Zealanders are potentially at risk.

What is Age Concern doing?

The **Age Concern Accredited Visiting Service (AVS)** was established in 1989 and is currently provided by 18 Age Concerns. The service links chronically lonely older people with accredited volunteers who visit on a regular basis. Visitors provide older people with increased social support, social connectedness and social interaction and are also trained to notice and report developing problems. In this way, the service makes a contribution to mitigating the consequences of chronic loneliness and social isolation and to achieving the priorities established by government. The service has a restorative focus aimed at increasing the client's social independence and integration.

Originally, AVS was funded through Vote: Health, but funding was devolved to the DHBs in 2001 and the national contract is now managed by Capital and Coast DHB. Not all DHBs were receiving the service at the time of devolution and due to a lack of funding for expansion, these gaps remain. The Accredited Visiting Service is currently able to reach between 1600 and 1700 clients at any one time. There is obviously scope for delivering the

service to much greater numbers of chronically lonely and very isolated older people, but funding remains a constraint. Around two-thirds of costs are currently being covered by volunteers and the Age Concerns. Increased travel expenses, mostly borne by our trained volunteers, are making it difficult to continue to recruit people willing to give their time.

The Accredited Visiting Service has the potential to meet the needs of the growing number of older people at risk of suffering the adverse effects of chronic loneliness and social isolation. In order to realise this potential, we have approached Capital and Coast DHB and the Ministry of Health for funding to increase the geographical coverage of the service, and meet the travel costs of volunteers.

What actions can the Minister for Senior Citizens take?

Help **reduce loneliness** by:

- supporting our bid for funding to enable the Accredited Visiting Service to contribute more effectively to desired population health and social outcomes for older people in New Zealand. (see attached)
- taking the message to the new Ministers of Health and Social Development about the adverse health and social effects of chronic loneliness.

1.3 Income – rising costs and falling interest rates

The issues as we see them

Most older people live on New Zealand Superannuation and a little extra. That 'little extra' has for many already been diminished by failed investments, and now lower interest rates see it reduced even further.

This means that most New Zealand seniors are managing on \$12,000 to \$15,500 a year, or \$231 to \$297 per week. The annual April 2008 CPI adjustment to NZ Super and the tax cuts of 1 October have not been enough to offset the rising cost of essential items like food and energy.

What is Age Concern doing?

We are raising awareness of the hardship faced by older people, both with central and local government. As the first port of call for older people, local Age Concerns ensure that seniors are made aware of the benefits that are available and are referred to Work and Income to apply for them.

We are calling for an increase in the couple rate of NZ Super to the maximum of 72.5% allowed by the Act and we would eventually like to see NZ Super equal the minimum wage.

We are working to dispel the common misconception that over-65s receive 66% of the net average wage. In fact senior *couples* receive 66% of the average wage *for individuals*. Whenever we refer to NZ Super we quote the individual rate, or append the words 'couple rate', and are encouraging officials and older people to do the same.

We are also working with the Domestic Energy Users' Network to highlight the impact of energy poverty on the health and wellbeing of older people. Homes that are hard to heat cost money and cause illness. We are therefore calling for a long-term programme of home energy retrofits - this will reduce the amount older people spend on energy and at the same time improve their health.

What actions can the Minister for Senior Citizens take?

The National Party response to our pre-election Questions for Candidates included recognition of the fact that the rising cost of living is having a significant impact on older people. We also noted the party's commitment to "improve the ability of those over 65 to afford a reasonable standard of living".

The Minister can help **increase the standard of living of older people** by:

- calling for more regular CPI adjustments to NZ Super – currently the adjustments run up to a year behind
- in the short term, calling for the couple rate of NZ Super to be increased to the maximum level allowed by the Act – 72.5% of the net average wage
- in the long term, calling for NZ Super to equal the minimum wage
- calling for crisis payments to the most vulnerable home energy consumers in order to help eliminate energy poverty
- calling for a long-term programme of home energy retrofits, with priority given to older people on low incomes.

1.4 Health

The issues as we see them

Teeth, ears, eyes

When teeth, ears and eyes stop working well, quality of life often suffers dramatically. Cost is a real barrier to receiving timely and appropriate care.

In the case of oral care, older people will often opt to have a tooth extracted, rather than pay for restoration work. While this may be the cheapest course of action, it will eventually compromise the person's ability to chew certain foods and in the worst cases can result in malnutrition.

Faced with a recommendation to purchase hearing aids, an older person will often settle for the cheapest aid, rather than the one that provides the best hearing. We welcome the recent increase in the hearing aid subsidy, but consider that more needs to be done to make the mid-range and high-tech hearing aids affordable. Basic aids do little more than amplify sound and do not function well in group interactions and meetings. A good hearing aid can enable an older person to continue to be active in the community. Conversely, a poor hearing aid or none at all can result in social isolation with all the concomitant negative effects on mental and physical health.

Similarly, an inability to afford eye care can result in a person becoming housebound or having to make a premature move into residential care.

If older people cannot afford to care for their teeth, ears and eyes the detrimental effects on health and wellbeing can be far-reaching, and often out of proportion to the original problem. The technology exists to prevent this unnecessary reduction in quality of life, and Age Concern New Zealand believes that it is inexcusable not to make that technology affordable.

Waiting times for elective surgery

Age Concern New Zealand feels strongly that there must be more recognition of the fact that older people are suffering unnecessarily as a result of extended waiting times for surgery for hips, knees and cataracts. While it is difficult to accurately determine the level of demand, anecdotal evidence continues to indicate that older people are having trouble getting on the public waiting lists for these operations and are often waiting for longer than is acceptable.

If forced to wait too long for operations to restore mobility or sight, older people are more likely to experience an irreversible reduction in quality of life

and independence - they might, for example, have a fall, become isolated or be forced to move out of their home prematurely. Such events in turn have considerable costs, both social and fiscal.

Importance of health promotion

We say that it is short-sighted and even dangerous to perceive the 'demographic bulge' as a threat to the health system. While it must be acknowledged that increased longevity can result in increased healthcare costs, we believe that careful long-term planning coupled with an emphasis on healthy lifestyles can help ensure that the health system is able to meet the challenges of demographic change. Sustained health promotion is one of the keys to improving quality of life and reducing the incidence of the chronic conditions that afflict both young and old.

Better public information

At present it is difficult for organisations such as ours to obtain information about progress towards achieving government health objectives, such as those of the Health of Older People Strategy. More consistent and regular reporting against the milestones by government and DHBs would improve both accountability and performance in the health system.

ACC

ACC statistics indicate that older people are not making full use of the scheme. This may be due to a lack of understanding of the fact that coverage is 24/7 and 'no fault'. It could equally be the result of not being asked the right questions by ACC contact centres. More needs to be done to ensure that barriers to access to the scheme are identified and removed.

What is Age Concern doing?

Teeth, ears, eyes

Age Concern New Zealand is calling for a free annual dental check-up and eye examination for people over 65. We are calling for hearing aids to be fully funded for people over 65. We are also taking every opportunity to raise awareness of the fact that if older people cannot afford to care for their teeth, ears and eyes the effects on their health can be dramatic and life-changing – out of proportion to any original problem.

Waiting times for elective surgery

Age Concern New Zealand has for some time been calling for hip replacements, knee replacements and cataract removal to be given higher priority by the public health system. We are also attempting to ascertain the actual demand for these operations.

Health promotion

Our organisation has a strong health promotion and positive ageing focus. We are contracted by the Ministry of Health to deliver health promotion programmes for older people through local Age Concerns. These local programmes include health education, community development, injury prevention and advocacy.

Age Concern celebrates International Men's Health week annually to raise awareness of men's health issues. We encourage local Age Concerns to hold men's health promotion activities in their communities.

Better public information

Age Concern New Zealand regularly requests progress reports against the Health of Older People Strategy and we make it our business to remind the Ministry of Health that it remains difficult to assess the progress being made by individual DHBs.

ACC

Age Concern New Zealand has been contracted by ACC to establish and chair the Older People Advisory Group to ACC. The purpose of the Group is to help ACC to ensure that older people have the best possible access to the ACC scheme.

Age Concern New Zealand will also continue to call for older people to have much fairer entitlement to ACC weekly compensation.

What actions can the Minister for Senior Citizens take?

Improve the health of older people by:

- calling for the implementation of the objectives of the Health of Older People Strategy
- calling for hearing aids, eye care and dental care to be more affordable
- calling for the oral health of older people to be made a priority under the Health Targets
- calling for waiting times for elective surgery to be reduced.

Part 2

POSITIVE AGEING STRATEGY

The issues as we see them

The Positive Ageing Strategy is the principal government strategy focusing on the needs of older New Zealanders. The ten goals of the Strategy are just as relevant today as they were when the Strategy was launched. They include income, health services, housing, transport, ageing in the community, culturally appropriate services, rural services, positive attitudes, employment opportunities, personal growth and participation.

It is clear that a lot of positive actions are being taken in these areas but in our view, the Strategy has not been taken seriously enough. No leadership has been given to its implementation. Not only that but, incredibly, there is no clear link between the Strategy and the "Positive Ageing Indicators."

Each year, a report containing anything and everything that might fit is produced without any critical assessment of the impact of the listed actions on older people. For example, the Highlights from the most recent Plan 2008-10 lists only three actions for Goal 8, "positive attitudes to ageing" and these are:

- "continuing to provide funding for war veterans to travel to commemorate the battles and events involving New Zealand veterans"
- "continuing to monitor Sages services so older volunteers can help families in need"
- "Kapiti Coast District Council will establish a mentoring project connecting older and younger generations."

Age Concern finds it astounding that these are the highlights of a two-year plan! We cannot help but ask how much progress these actions will make towards achieving the change in attitudes that is so badly needed.

Government officials respond to our concerns with the refrain that the Strategy's goals are "aspirational". We regard this as a 'cop out'. We believe that outcomes against each of the goals should be able to be measured – there seems to be little sense in having a plan if progress towards achieving it cannot be measured.

The Positive Ageing Strategy is a positive plan but it needs leadership, commitment and more action.

What is Age Concern doing?

We are reviewing the most recent plan and will be sending the Office for Senior Citizens our response in the near future. It will contain bouquets and brickbats as well as requests for more information and involvement.

Actions which are likely to have a high impact on many older people, or target vulnerable seniors will be commended – for example the Ministry of Transport- SuperGold card initiative making public transport more accessible and affordable to older people (pp.200-201).

Others, like the “promotion” of an existing publication and website by the Retirement Commission (pp.178-180) will be censured for being half-hearted. Are these two actions really the Commission’s main contribution to Goal 1 over two years?

The carers' information pack for older carers and older people requiring care (pp.166-167) are among the actions we would like more information about.

The Ministry of Social Development’s “transformation of services for seniors” (pp.181 and 187) is the type of action we are keen to collaborate on. In fact Age Concern believes it should be the lead community agency on this project.

Age Concern is currently the lead community agency with MSD on preventing elder abuse and neglect. We are also named as the community partner for many other actions listed in the report and plan 2008–10. We note, however, that there are actions to which Age Concern is contributing as a partner at national and local level, that are not expressly acknowledged in the publication.

In addition to these actions, Age Concern New Zealand is consulted by government on a wide range of topics concerning older people. Currently we are responding to these at the rate of at least one consultation a month. We are also active in voicing the needs and interests of older people in national forums and bodies, making one representation per working day.

What actions can the Minister for Senior Citizens take?

Embrace the Positive Ageing Strategy and become its ambassador. The Positive Ageing Strategy needs a leader who is able to command the respect of colleagues and officials across government departments and into local government.

Promote the Strategy as the principal tool for making a difference to the lives of older people.

Call for clear indicators that the goals of the Strategy are being met and for these indicators to marry with the existing Positive Ageing Indicators.

Part 3

SERVICES TO OLDER PEOPLE

Age Concern New Zealand is also working to ensure that older people get the information and services they need. To this end, we support local Age Concerns to be the *first and best* port of call for older people when they need information, support, advice and advocacy.

What is Age Concern doing?

Age Concerns exist to serve the needs of older people and they are firmly anchored in their community. In order to build on these strengths, Age Concern New Zealand is currently seeking funding to provide a core 'supportive service' to seniors throughout New Zealand – which is why we have greeted the announcement of MSD's Services for Seniors Delivery Transformation Programme with some consternation. While we commend the decision to focus on the needs of older people and improve their access to services, we are not convinced that the Ministry's initiative will not duplicate supportive services already being provided by Age Concerns, and also prevent new Age Concerns from being established. The MSD initiative could undermine the existence of some Age Concerns, and it could also jeopardise a long-standing spirit of cooperation between NGOs and government.

Furthermore, it must be remembered that older people are often loath to approach a government department, whereas they do not hesitate to contact Age Concern. We believe that the government aim of improving services to seniors can best be achieved by placing the local Age Concern at the centre of any new service delivery model for seniors. This solution would also see the gaps in Age Concern services in this country close - our people are good at creating very effective services with start-up funding.

What actions can the Minister for Senior Citizens take?

Improve services to older people and support the NGO/not-for-profit sector by:

- encouraging MSD to make Age Concern community leaders in the new service delivery model for seniors
- backing our supportive services bid in the next Budget round (see attached).