



BRIEFING

to the Minister for Social Development and Employment

Hon Paula Bennett

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 you to key issues for older New Zealanders and for our organisation

to explain what Age Concern is doing to make a difference

to encourage you to support us in our work for older people.

In response to what older people are telling us, Age Concern New Zealand is currently active on four main policy fronts: attitudes; chronic loneliness; income; access to health care.

We are working to change attitudes to older people, so as to end elder abuse and neglect (**see section 1 below**). We are working to combat chronic loneliness, thereby improving the health and wellbeing of vulnerable older people (**section 2**). We are working to ensure that older people have an adequate income (**section 3**) and that they have access to the health care they need (**section 4**).

Age Concern is the one national community organisation that works for all older people living in New Zealand. We are concerned that proposed initiatives by the Ministry of Social Development may jeopardise our work in some areas (**section 5**).

1.0 Elder Abuse and Neglect must end

1.1 The issues as we see them

Age Concern Elder Abuse and Neglect Prevention Services are, on average, dealing with **two cases of verified elder abuse every working day** and we know this is just the tip of the iceberg. International prevalence estimates suggest that up to 50,000 older New Zealanders may be being subjected to abuse or neglect. At present only 25 services exist to meet this potential need. 24 of these are part-funded by MSD.

Abuse and neglect can have wide-ranging and long-term detrimental effects on an older person's quality of life, their physical and mental health, as well as on their finances, living arrangements and relationships. Elder abuse can shorten an individual's life expectancy. The effects on the individual in turn result in fiscal and social costs associated with increased spending on health and support services, reduced participation of older people in communities and increased poverty.

It is imperative that we strengthen our collective response to elder abuse and neglect so that older people enjoy healthy, respectful, stable relationships, free from violence.

What needs to happen?

Support to existing elder abuse and neglect prevention services must continue and increase. These services are considered by MSD to be essential, and we urge the Minister to proceed without delay with the plan to fully fund them through Pathways to Partnership.

The number of elder abuse and neglect services must increase to cover geographical gaps in the following areas: Far North; Rodney; Thames-Coromandel; Bay of Plenty; Rotorua; Marlborough; Ashburton and Greymouth-Hokitika.

Attitudes to older people must change. Age Concern New Zealand sees older people as an asset to society and we are pleased that your Ministry shares this perspective: "Older people have a wealth of valuable life experience, skills and knowledge. They play a vital role in the success of our families, whanau and communities." (MSD Practice and Policy Briefing, p.iv) Sadly, this vital role is often completely overlooked, giving way to the perception, predominant in many sectors, that older people are a burden and a cost. This perception lies at the heart of ageism, breeding negative attitudes which can very easily lead to elder abuse and neglect. If we can

eliminate ageist attitudes, behaviours should change and we will be well on the way to preventing all forms of elder abuse and neglect.

1.2 What is Age Concern doing?

Providing Elder Abuse and Neglect Prevention Services

Age Concern is currently the lead community agency funded by MSD to prevent elder abuse and neglect. We have been active in preventing elder abuse and neglect in New Zealand for 20 years and are 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 to people facing elder abuse. Age Concern Elder Abuse and Neglect Prevention Services receive, on average, two cases of verified elder abuse every working day.

The Services also offer elder abuse and neglect awareness-raising education for professionals and members of the public and provide training for people working with and caring for older people. We regard education and training as integral to the detection and prevention of elder abuse and if resources were available, we would extend our education programmes to all retirement villages and rest homes in the country.

The awareness-raising activities provided by the Services aim to promote early identification and prevention of elder abuse or neglect. The Services use World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, 15 June, as an opportunity to provide a range of events and activities to raise awareness of elder abuse and neglect in the community. Last year, Age Concern New Zealand and local Age Concerns marked this day with a powerful campaign about the importance of respect – **“respect not neglect, respect not threats”**. **We believe that 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 are working in partnership with the Older People’s Policy Team at the Ministry of Social Development to develop priorities for action on elder abuse and neglect prevention. 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. In December 2008, a joint paper was presented to the Taskforce for Action on Violence within Families recommending priority areas for action.

Monitoring the 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. 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 released a training and 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, public relations companies and advertising agencies to use their skills to change attitudes to older people for the better. They will have until July 2009 to enter 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.

Monitoring actions taken under Goal 8 of the Positive Ageing Strategy

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. In our view, the Strategy has not been taken seriously enough. No leadership has been given to its implementation. Not only that, but there is no clear link between the Strategy and MSD's *Positive Ageing Indicators*.

Each year, Age Concern New Zealand reviews the *Positive Ageing Strategy Report and Plan* in an effort to assess the impact of the listed actions on older people. Our response to the two most recent reports has been critical of the lack of action on Goal 8: people of all ages have positive attitudes to ageing and to older people. The Highlights from the Action Plan 2008-10 lists only three actions for Goal 8 and these are:

- “Veteran’s Affairs New Zealand is continuing to provide funding for war veterans to travel to commemorate the battles and events involving New Zealand veterans”
- “Family and Community Services, MSD is continuing to monitor SAGES (older people as mentors) services so that older volunteers can help families and people 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.

1.3 What actions can the Minister for Social Development take?

- proceed without delay with the plan to fully fund Elder Abuse and Neglect Prevention Services through Pathway to Partnership
- fund 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)
- request regular progress reports on the work being carried out by Age Concern New Zealand and MSD
- request regular updates on the Ministry of Health plan to make rest home audits public
- support the Age Concern New Zealand Patron’s Award
- call for more action on Goal 8 of the Positive Ageing Strategy
- support your colleague the Minister for Senior Citizens in promoting the Positive Ageing Strategy as the principal tool for making a difference to the lives of older people.

2.0 Chronic Loneliness is a silent epidemic that must be taken seriously

2.1 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 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 continue to participate 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.

2.2 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. The Service has a restorative focus aimed at increasing the client's social independence and integration. In this way, AVS makes a contribution to mitigating the consequences of chronic loneliness and social isolation and to achieving the priorities established by government. Indeed it is likely that AVS is already providing support to some of the older people with intensive needs who are being targeted in the new MSD service delivery model for seniors. The support and contact provided by a visitor may also be preventing others from falling into that category.

The AVS was originally funded through Vote: Health, but in 2001 funding was devolved to the DHBs, 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 AVS 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.

2.3 What actions can the Minister for Social Development take?

- recognise the seriousness of the adverse effects of chronic loneliness
- fund the Accredited Visiting Service to reach its full potential to prevent older people from becoming disconnected and to support older people with high and complex needs. (see attached funding bid).

3.0 Income – rising costs and falling interest rates

3.1 The issues as we see them

Most older people have planned to live on New Zealand Superannuation and a little extra. However, that ‘little extra’ has for many 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 CPI adjustment to NZ Superannuation and the 1 October 2008 tax cuts have not been enough to offset the rising cost of essential items like food and energy.

Older people on this low fixed income are having difficulty heating their homes in winter, they are not always able to afford hearing aids, dental care, and eye care, they are struggling to maintain their homes and some are finding it hard to pay their rates and even phone bills.

3.2 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 New Zealand Superannuation** to the maximum of 72.5% allowed by the Act, and we would eventually like to see NZ Superannuation equal the minimum wage.

We are calling for the **real value of NZ Superannuation to be maintained** through more regular CPI adjustments – currently the adjustments run up to a year behind.

We are also working to **dispel the common misconception that all superannuitants receive 66% of the net average wage**, when in fact senior *couples* receive 66% of *one* net average wage. Whenever we refer to NZ Superannuation we quote the individual rate, or append the words ‘couple rate’ and we encourage officials and older people to do the same.

We are also encouraging MSD to ensure that migrants to New Zealand are made aware that if they are entitled to an overseas pension, their NZ Superannuation may be reduced.

We are calling for a **free annual dental check-up and eye examination** for every New Zealander over 65. We are also calling for **basic hearing aids to**

be fully funded for people over 65 and for mid-and high-range aids to be made more affordable.

We are 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.

We are calling for the **rates rebate to be increased** to \$1000 and the threshold for eligibility to be raised to \$27,000 and indexed to future income growth. We also wish to see the **rates rebate extended to income-eligible retirement village residents**.

3.3 What actions can the Minister for Social Development take?

We were pleased to see that 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". Such an improvement could be achieved in the following ways:

- an increase in the couple rate of NZ Superannuation to the maximum level allowed by the Act – 72.5% of the net average wage
- increasing NZ Superannuation to equal the minimum wage
- more regular CPI adjustments to NZ Superannuation
- increasing the hearing aid subsidy to SuperGold card holders to \$1000 per aid. This would cover the full cost of basic aids and make mid-range aids more affordable
- a free annual dental check-up and eye examination for SuperGold card holders
- supplementary crisis payments to the most vulnerable home energy consumers in order to help eliminate energy poverty
- a long-term programme of home energy retrofits, with priority given to older people on low incomes
- an increase in the rates rebate and extension of the scheme to include eligible retirement villages residents.

4.0 Health

4.1 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.

4.2 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 every New Zealander over 65. We are calling for basic hearing aids to be fully funded for people over 65 and for mid-and high-range aids to be made more affordable. 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 the 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.

4.3 What actions can the Minister for Social Development take?

- increase the hearing aid subsidy to SuperGold card holders to \$1000 per aid. This would cover the full cost of basic aids and make mid-range aids more affordable
- fund an annual dental check-up and eye examination for SuperGold card holders.

5.0 SERVICES TO OLDER PEOPLE

Age Concern New Zealand is working to ensure that older people in New Zealand 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. 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 fear that the Ministry's initiative will duplicate supportive services already being provided by Age Concerns, and 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 and collaboration between our organisation 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 a little start-up funding.

Early in 2008 Age Concern New Zealand began exploring with Work and Income the possibility of including Age Concern brochures in a resource pack to be sent to those turning 65. We now have a set of suitable brochures and will be contacting Work and Income in the near future.

What actions can the Minister for Social Development take?

- make Age Concern the lead community agency in the new service delivery model for seniors
- acknowledge the first-port-of-call service provided by Age Concerns to older people and the need to strengthen and enhance these services

- appreciate our anxiety and alarm over the Ministry-led initiative to develop a service delivery model which could threaten Age Concern's core service
- acknowledge that Age Concern has significant infrastructure that could be expanded and enhanced
- encourage your Ministry to support us in our core supportive services work
- endorse our bid to include information about Age Concern services in the Work and Income resource pack.