

## **Ministry of Justice Independent Panel Feedback**

### **1. Feedback on the 2014 reforms and how they have affected families and children**

The continued negative impact on families and children when parents/caregivers separate is hard to measure. Reducing access to counselling – where parents can talk through their situation with an impartial and qualified person will have had flow-on effects for their children and whānau.

### **2. Feedback on how the 2014 reforms have affected your organisation?**

Skylight has delivered the Parenting Through Separation (PTS) course since it was first developed. Skylight notes there is an ongoing increase in demand for the PTS course and requests for counselling for issues around family change for both young people and adults.

There is a considerable amount of administration time spent behind the scenes for each PTS participant including registration in the MoJ system before and then confirming completion after the course for the Skylight team. This, along with the expectation that we attempt to make follow-up phone calls for every participant (often requiring repeat calls), means the costs for this programme are higher than for other government contracts we hold. Skylight suggests that if seeking this feedback must continue (although we question the value of the feedback if it is not changing or causing the course to change), it may be sought from a certain number of participants in different regions each quarter. Then the data will still be collected, but the administrative burden on community organisations will be reduced.

### **3. Any improvements you would like to see regarding the current PTS courses and delivery of courses?**

Skylight receives positive feedback from participants about the course and how our facilitators deliver PTS.

Feedback from Skylight PTS facilitators highlights the need for more community awareness of the course. The facilitators often hear that parents wish they had heard about PTS courses earlier.

Side-note – ongoing publicity by the Ministry of Justice of the PTS courses across all education providers, from early childhood through to tertiary level could improve community awareness. Libraries, community centres and associations as well as other organisations could also share information more widely about how people can access the course.

***Specific feedback from Skylight – some of these subjects were discussed in the meeting with the Panel on 19 October.***

#### **1. Percentage of non-attendance**

There are a small number of individuals who do not attend the course they are booked on and most register for another course when contacted by Skylight. After reviewing the data, it is not a high number that needs more investigation. This may be caused by the two different factors leading people to attend the course (personal motivation and the course is compulsory in order to go further in the court process).

**2. Why registered participants have not attended the course**

Non-attendance of PTS is due to a range of issues. Difficulties in finding childcare, fitting the course in with other responsibilities (e.g. paid work), and unexpected events such as illness. Recently, one participant couldn't leave her young baby as she was still breastfeeding – Skylight has offered a one-on-one course to this person. Others who have not attended the course have not given a reason why. Despite repeated attempts to contact and reschedule, some do not go on to attend a PTS course with Skylight. They may decide to approach Family Works (another provider delivering PTS in the Wellington region) instead, or not attend a course at all.

**3. Cost analysis for the delivery of programme for the 2017 - 2018 financial year**

These are the costs of delivering the PTS course in the Wellington area for Skylight. We have worked hard to reduce costs wherever possible while still delivering a course that is valuable for participants and meets the requirements of the contract. Although some costs will be different in other regions, we are concerned that funds from other areas (e.g. donations) are required for Skylight to provide the course.

Contracted income	\$27,000
<b>Costs</b>	
Venue Hire	\$2,300
Contractor (service delivery)	\$9,200
Mileage/transport	\$1,600
Printing/Stationery/consumables	\$600
Courier costs	\$240
IT costs	\$110
Admin/Skylight salaries	\$21,400
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$35,450</b>

Due to the financial constraints, Skylight facilitators deliver the course on their own. Best practice would be to have two people facilitating the course, especially for courses with more than eight participants. Some people have difficult issues that arise during the course, and an additional facilitator would be able to spend some time with that person. This would improve the safety of the facilitators, particularly those working in the evenings and weekends.

**4. PTS course being delivered online – pro's and con's**

Having an online option would help people who are unable to access the course due to:

- living in an isolated/rural area
- living in a small town with courses offered infrequently
- living in a small town and being unable to attend the same course as their ex-partner
- transport issues
- managing work responsibilities
- managing childcare responsibilities
- needing privacy
- sensitivity or shyness
- not wanting to share too much personal information.

The online option could offer a buffer for those people who may feel uncomfortable attending in person.

The online option may not be appropriate in situations such as:

- no or limited internet/computer access
- English as a second language
- other communication issues
- when people want a more active course experience where they can talk and share experiences with other parents, face to face.

One of the Skylight facilitators noted that: "I think the beauty of the PTS course is that there is information, but also hearing other people's perspectives and talking about experience and emotions - that is where the real work is done". She wonders if this exchange between parents would be lost if the course was online.

Skylight has experience of developing and delivering webinars (these are available on our website [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz)). We are interested in working with the Ministry of Justice if an online delivery option of PTS is developed.

##### **5. PTS course – the implications of PTS as a compulsory component of the court process as opposed to voluntary attendance.**

Feedback from many participants shows that they wished they had known about PTS earlier. They would then have done it voluntarily, as they are there to gather information around the system/processes and how to cope. Many have stated that it is a great reminder for them, that their children's needs should be first and foremost.

This feedback is supported by the findings in the Evaluation of Family Dispute Resolution Service and Mandatory Self-representation (October 2015), Ministry of Justice: *"Of the parents who had attended PTS, the vast majority indicated that they gained practical ideas for making child care arrangements from other participants and from the course information"*.

There are also times when people call at the last minute to register for a course, as they have a court date and must have completed PTS before attending this. They are attending simply

because it is compulsory. This can lead to high numbers of participants in a course and pressure on our facilitators and administrator. There was an instance where two people attending a PTS course did not want to be there and became disruptive for others in the room.

**6. One on one PTS course – what are the circumstances for these and how many have we delivered in the past year?**

Skylight has not delivered any one-on-one courses in the past year. We have recently had a request from a breastfeeding mum with an infant under six months old who has advised attending a four-hour course would be difficult for her. She has not yet confirmed that she would like to take up the offer of the one on one course. Skylight appreciates the willingness of the Ministry of Justice relationship manager to be flexible and support us to deliver the course in these situations.

**7. Implications of the changes to Counselling Services – The 2014 reforms took away free pre-court counselling for separating parents and replaced it with family dispute resolution.**

Feedback from some of the PTS participants identifies that post course counselling or counselling in general, would be beneficial. Cost is often a barrier for people as the separation process is extremely expensive, especially when lawyers are involved. Those young people whose parents are finding it difficult to agree may benefit from counselling (as well as the parents). Parents/caregivers are also often confused about where to go to access counselling for their children.

**8. Skylight's ability to train other organisations to deliver PTS programmes?**

Skylight has developed a comprehensive training programme for its facilitators to ensure the PTS course is delivered in a consistent and professional way in the Wellington region. We are happy to offer this training on a nationwide basis; it could also be developed and delivered as a webinar.

**9. Children's programmes**

Skylight has considerable experience in developing and delivering group programmes (to young people needing support when their whānau/family are going through change, loss or grief. These programmes are developed with our clinical team and are reviewed and updated regularly. Skylight also trains other community organisations to deliver this type of programme.

The workshops are scheduled during school holidays and are dependent on funding to go ahead. There is always demand for these courses and the feedback from the young people and their whānau/family is positive, both during the course, and in the short and long-term. Young people are also able to attend one-on-one counselling if additional support is needed.

## **10. Support for teenagers/older children**

There is a gap in the system for teenagers and older children who are not accessing appropriate support when their parents/caregivers separate. This includes one-on-one counselling, group/family counselling, or group workshops. Young people are already dealing with a range of challenges and trying to cope with upheavals in their home, can have a negative impact on their wellbeing.

Skylight has been delivering training for the Travellers Programme (a school-based resilience-building programme for Year 9 students - <https://www.skylight.org.nz/build-resilience/travellers>) for the past 18 years. This programme could be adjusted and tailored for this age group dealing with their parents/caregivers separating. We are interested in using the same delivery model as Travellers (train the facilitators and then provide ongoing support to the community where the programme is delivered). This enhances the skills in organisations across Aotearoa and enables young people to cope with current and future challenges they may face.

### **Additional note – feedback from the National Sexual Violence Survivor Advocacy (NSVSA) Service (led by Louise Nicholas).**

The NSVSA supports and provides advocacy for those women who have experienced sexual violence and are going through the justice system. Although the example provided below is about one survivor's experience, similar situations will be happening throughout Aotearoa.

'We have a survivor who is waiting for her trial in March 2019. The alleged offender is her ex-partner and her children's father. They are going through the family court as he wants custody. She is having to endure round table meetings and family court sessions with her ex-partner involved, and it is extremely hard on her having to be in the same room as him. The family court and criminal court are two separate systems therefore her trauma is not taken into account. At the time of her last family court date she called me [NSVSA team member] as she was so stressed. Her father was attending with her to make sure the offender did not intimidate her as he had done at other meetings. Her Dad was so angry that it took me [the NSVSA team member] over an hour to calm him down and ask him to not jeopardize her hearing, as all he would do is hand back the power to the offender.

These cases may be few and far between but I [the NSVSA team member] believe it is important to have any family court matters set aside until the criminal case is completed. Her criminal case has taken at least 18 months to come to court, with many delays.

This situation will have a long-term impact on the children in this family and the system does not appear to have their best interests as the top priority. Ongoing delays in both the criminal

and the family court extend the trauma for those involved with the system. The long time for cases to be resolved also has a financial cost for the parents, as lawyers are often involved.

**Lawyer for child**

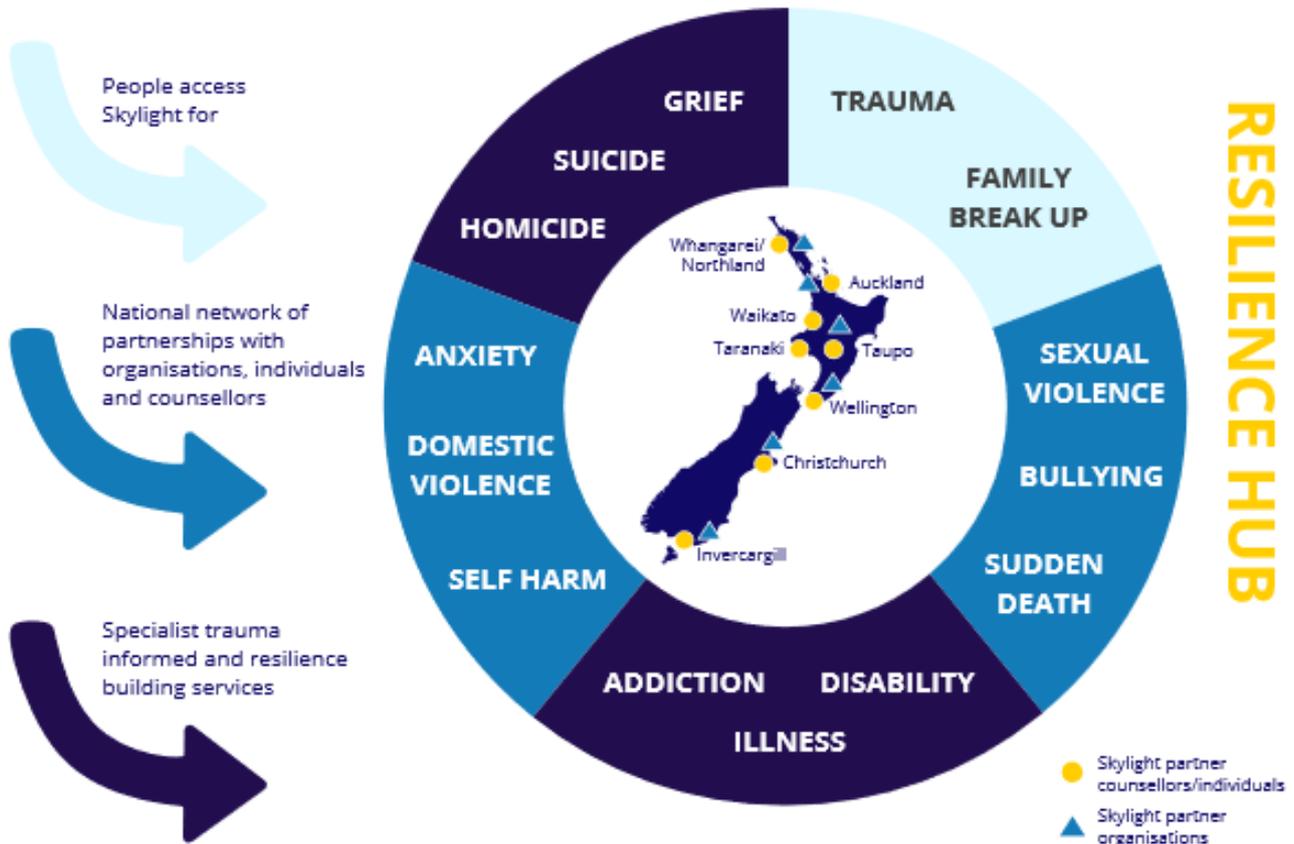
The Skylight team is aware of a number of instances where the lawyer for child is not communicating openly with both parents/their lawyers, and their interactions with the child/ren may not get the best information from the young people concerned.

Skylight appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission and thanks the team for their flexibility with when it is to be sent to the Ministry. If you would like to discuss any of the points raised in more depth, please contact us.



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- Post suicide support
- Support groups
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- Counselling
- Training
- Games/DVD/Library
- Specialist support information
- Research
- Children's programmes
- Advocacy and support
- Suicide services
- Webinars
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- Growing community through partnering and networks
- Building community knowledge and capability
- National Network of specialist facilitators and trainers

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