

Te Hiringa Mahara

Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission

Briefing to the Incoming Minister for
Youth

February 2025



Welcome from the Chair

Congratulations and welcome to your new role as Minister for Youth. The Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission - Te Hiringa Mahara (the Commission), is an independent crown entity legislated to contribute to better and equitable mental health and wellbeing outcomes for all people in New Zealand. We have a particular focus on the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

The Commission was established by the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission Act 2020, in response to public and cross-sector calls, including through He Ara Oranga: Report of the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction. We provide leadership within New Zealand's mental health and wellbeing system, by providing independent cross-government oversight and holding the government to account for improving the mental health and wellbeing of people in New Zealand.

You have taken on this new portfolio at a time of considerable challenge for the mental health and wellbeing of young people in New Zealand. Supporting young people's mental health is a priority for you and for the government, and we would like to work with you to support those aims.



Hayden Wano

Chair, Te Hiringa Mahara - Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission

Action on young people's mental health and addiction outcomes is needed

1. Mental health is a key concern raised by young people, and raised about young people by their families, communities, and the schools and organisations that care for them. There has been measurable deterioration in youth mental health and determinants of wellbeing in recent years: average youth mental wellbeing scores dropped between 2018 and 2021, continuing a longer-term decline, and one in five 15 to 24-year-olds experienced psychological distress in 2022/23. Perhaps most concerning, suicide is the leading cause of death for New Zealand adolescents, and New Zealand's youth suicide rate is one of the highest in the developed world.
2. In addition to the human costs, the annual cost of the burden of serious mental illness, including addiction, in New Zealand is around 5% of gross domestic product. This is higher than comparable countries, and in 2024 equates to around \$21 billion. Improving mental health and wellbeing outcomes can be expected to support the delivery of a range of Government priorities and targets – in particular, it helps improve educational and employment attendance and outcomes. Better mental health and wellbeing for young people is an investment in their future.
3. There are a number of factors that underscore poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes. Our monitoring and research have highlighted that, compared to older adults, more young people report loneliness, and fewer consider they could easily talk to someone when feeling down; young people are more likely to experience discrimination; and are less likely to have trust in other people. Rangatahi Māori, rainbow youth, disabled young people, and those living in higher deprivation neighbourhoods face greater challenges and poorer outcomes.
4. For those who seek help, options for initial mental health support are increasing - telehealth services can provide accessible help for young people in addition to a wide range of digital tools, online platforms, and social media; and brief interventions for young people with mild-moderate needs are seeing thousands of young people. However, young people are less likely to be able to get professional help for their mental health needs compared to other age groups. Their access to specialist services is decreasing, and they wait longer for access to those services.
5. Many responses to support mental health and wellbeing outcomes are available, often identified by young people and those who support them – and many of those solutions sit outside of the mental health and addiction system. Our report from 2023, which we would be happy to discuss with you, highlights four common themes identified by young people as barriers to mental health and wellbeing: uncertain futures, racism and discrimination, social media and online harms, and challenges to whānau wellbeing and intergenerational connections. Within these areas, young people identify the problems and ideas for how they can be addressed – including appropriate effort to keep young people safe on social media. Further, a range of community organisations, including iwi providers, youth-led non-government organisations, and youth one-stop shops are providing practical support.

6. To lift young peoples' wellbeing, we need to address the barriers they have identified, provide services they want to use, and all with the participation of young people in decisions and design of services that affect them.

As Minister for Youth, you can help improve mental health and wellbeing

7. You can have a meaningful impact on youth outcomes, by supporting efforts that lift mental health and wellbeing. Importantly, you can help ensure that young people have a seat at decision-making tables where they can shape the future, and their voices and perspectives are heard.
8. Your Youth Development budget can support young people to use their voice, and to have hope and aspirations that come with that agency. You could seek to hear more from young people who face particular barriers to engagement, such as those who live with poverty, disabled young people, and those from migrant and refugee communities.
9. Outside of your Ministry's influence, you can reflect the concerns of young people in places where they do not often have a voice - including in parliament and with your colleagues across government. This may include advocating, alongside the Minister for Mental Health, for considered action on social media safety, improvements to youth mental health services and an end to young people being admitted to adult facilities.
10. Cross-agency collaboration will be necessary to achieve real improvements in mental health and wellbeing outcomes for young people, and you could help drive this. The suicide prevention action plan being developed by the Ministry of Health is a good example of this - for young people, action will be needed in health settings, schools, communities, and families.

We're here to help drive improvement and highlight what works

11. Through our legislated functions, the Commission is here to provide leadership and independent oversight. We are led by a Board with a wide range of sector and community experience, and we engage with a range of communities who experience different challenges in both mental health and addiction and in accessing services. We bring these views to our monitoring and reporting, and to the recommendations we make to improve the way the mental health and addiction system meets the needs of people that interact with it, as well as their family, whānau and communities.
12. Through our independent monitoring, we help show how well the mental health and addiction system is performing and where it needs to improve. Beyond the findings highlighted in this briefing, some recent reports which provide useful information and guidance for your portfolio include:
 - a. our infographic - assessment of youth and rangatahi wellbeing and access to services¹;
 - b. our literature review and report on youth wellbeing²;

¹ <https://www.mhwc.govt.nz/our-work/wellbeing/youth-rangatahi-wellbeing-assessment/infographic/>

² <https://www.mhwc.govt.nz/our-work/wellbeing/youth-wellbeing-insights/>

- c. our Access and Choice report, looking at the first 3 years of this programme, which sought to provide support for people with mild-moderate need, including young people and through youth-focused services³
 - d. our supplementary paper with the Access and Choice report, focused on improving access for youth⁴
 - e. the Office of the Auditor General's report on youth mental health services⁵; and
 - f. the parliamentary Mental Health and Addiction Wellbeing Cross-party Group's Under One Umbrella report on mental health, alcohol and other drug use care for young people⁶.
13. We also have a key monitoring report planned for April 2025, looking at the 5-year delivery of the Access and Choice programme, which includes data on young people, and on youth-focused services.

We would like to meet to discuss our shared priorities and how we can help improve outcomes for young people.

³ <https://www.mhwc.govt.nz/news-and-resources/the-access-and-choice-programme-report-on-the-first-three-years-2022/>

⁴ <https://www.mhwc.govt.nz/assets/Reports/Access-and-Choice-programme/2022/FINAL-Access-and-Choice-Youth-report-2022-PDF.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.oag.parliament.nz/2024/youth-mental-health/overview.htm>

⁶ <https://www.platform.org.nz/what-we-do/work/advocacy/cross-party-under-one-umbrella>

Appendix: Board member and Chief Executive profiles



Hayden Wano
Chair

Hayden is of Te Atiawa, Taranaki, and Ngāti Awa descent and has over 40 years health sector experience in mental health, community, and medical services, including 25 years as CEO of Tui Ora. Hayden is a member of a range of governing Boards.



Kevin Hague
Deputy Chair

Kevin is the Chair of the Public Health Advisory Committee, the West Coast PHO, and Takiwā Poutini (the West Coast Locality). Kevin was a Member of Parliament for eight years and has been Chief Executive of a number of organisations, including the West Coast DHB.



Wayne Langford
Board member

Wayne has held governance roles in the mental health, veterinarian and rural education space. He is involved in a variety of rural industry and community initiatives, including currently chairing Federated Farmers. Wayne farms with his family in Golden Bay



Professor Sunny Collings
Board member

Sunny is Chief Executive of the Health Research Council, following nine years as Dean and Head of Campus at the University of Otago Wellington. Sunny practiced as a Consultant Psychiatrist for over 25 years and has broad expertise as a researcher, manager, and senior leader in the clinical mental health sector, in health academia, and in suicide prevention.



Dr Barbara Disley
Board member

Barbara is the former CEO of Emerge Aotearoa and was a member of the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction. Barbara is Chair of the IIMHL/IDL (Global Leaders Exchange) and Board member of TheMHS. Barbara has held a number of senior public sector positions including chair of the first Mental Health Commission and Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Education.



Tuari Potiki
Board member

Tuari is of Kāi Tahu, Kāti Mamoe and Waitaha descent. He has more than 30 years' experience in Māori alcohol and drug and mental health services, as both a clinician and manager. Tuari was previously the former Director of Māori Development at the University of Otago and Board member for the Southern District Health Board. He is Chair of the New Zealand Drug Foundation, Chair of Needle Exchange Services Trust (NEST), and is a Board member of Te Rau Ora.



Alexander El Amanni

Board member

Alexander has lived experience of mental health, addiction, justice, and social development services. Alexander works across the mental health and addiction sector with roles in clinical practice, education, research and consumer advocacy.



Karen Orsborn

Tumu Whakarae | Chief Executive

Karen has held various leadership roles in the health sector. Previously, Karen was Director Health Quality Improvement and Deputy Chief Executive at the Health Quality and Safety Commission (HQSC) and Group Manager Funding at Manatū Hauora. Karen also held leadership roles at the former Hawkes Bay District Health Board.