**Third Data Hui - 19 April 2016**

**Commentary on the operating environment presentations – Len Cook**

The presentations this morning highlighted that the information to support decisions in community based social services is expanding rapidly in organisations at the forefront of change. This is necessitating a fundamental shift in the operating environment, through systems wide investment in information infrastructures and their application in decision support. Much has been presented about ways that infrastructure that supports decision-making involves the integration of information about services at an individual level, gathered from many sources. These services span a wide range of social services and across government, community and commercial providers, operating in real time.

The afternoon presentations point to the wider range of issues that will drive change in the services that government funds, while also enabling a strong focus on the people receiving services. From the first talk by the Minister of Finance, most talks eluded to the importance of aspirations, and the protection of individual autonomy, both of which have several dimensions.

We heard of aspirations for a better social services system. We also heard of the aspirations that those in the system have of a better future for young New Zealanders, as well as influencing the aspirations of the people receiving services - based on a sense of opportunity for their future. The Pacific presentation had a powerful chart highlighting this. There was also recognition that a strong social services system has a different balance of rules, sanctions and autonomy than we see now. Those who work in it need the autonomy to do the right thing, and the system should respect the autonomy of all citizens.

Across the presentations there is some tension between the public sector agency view of customer centric and that of community organisations. For government, integrated services cannot just be what the big agencies think people should get if they work together, but recognised that a strong commitment to continuous improvement and evaluation was needed for citizens to benefit.

The Police open data presentation was aspirational in that it demonstrated in practice so much of what is still being planned for in the wider system. As with several other developments in the New Zealand Public sector, it highlighted just what can be achieved when one well organised agency makes innovative use of technology, takes a wide view of its place in society, is focused on citizens first, and is directed at an especially important matter of public concern. The real-time application of tools that support decision-making are used alongside geographic information for strategic decisions about priorities. The models of process management have wider value as a functioning pilot of what might be possible system-wide, as well as being of immediate benefit to police and the public of New Zealand.

The Social Investment Unit presented its data strategy to meet government’s vision to improve or increase access to the data it holds about individuals. This was in line with the principle that data held by government on individuals should be made available to those individuals or their agents when requested. The social investment unit presented a phased development of new social services wide infrastructure to support decision-making. This will enable what is known about particular processes and populations and their issues to be drawn on in an immediately accessible form by providers. It is a way of ensuring that those delivering services have access to a comprehensive history, and that commitments for future engagement are monitored properly. There are many issues to face, mostly seen as legal, cultural and structural, rather than technological. In every aspect, collaboration and partnering is recognised as the critical success factor to building a better functioning sector-wide social services system. However, partnering to promote change is also a big challenge

Dame Diane Robertson highlighted the need to formalize, in some thoughtful way, how information sharing would be accepted by citizens. Those in the custody of information seek to collaborate, connect information and engage with them. As a country which has no written constitution, New Zealanders have a degree of pragmatism about the ability to evolve. This however may be challenged if changes in information sharing are made in an arbitrary manner. The concept of a social license was seen as a powerful and relevant way of reaching resolution. This was seen as requiring thoughtful ways of engaging citizens and their communities.

The Deputy Privacy Commissioner observed that the Privacy Act was initiated to enable rather than introduce a prescriptive approach. The focus should be on meeting the intent to protect privacy, not just to ensure legality of actions. Managing risk by mitigation strategies was highlighted. Issues of governance of information, standards, new legal protections, a responsible authority, and transparency, as well as a right to opt out were the mainstays in this. It was clear that the Privacy Commissioner saw his role as ensuring that proper actions were enabled by the act. For the issues and opportunities now ahead of both the public service and community organisations to serve people better, practical solutions did exist.

The Government Statistician highlighted what is already possible with linked information in her custody. The Integrated Data Infrastructure was seen as an expandable model, growing continually. Administrative data is an increasing share of the information in the statistical system. Proposals for changes to the Statistics Act 1975 were signaled at the hui, most particularly in the area of releasing named information.

The presentations complemented the morning examples from the not for profit organisations. They highlighted the significance of seeing evaluation in a very broad light, most especially continuous improvement and that needed real time decision support. They also highlighted just how much the public sector reforms of the 1980s had narrowed expectations of departmental and contracted organizations so much that opportunity for innovation and raising service overall had been lost. This did not mean that we did not need good research based models to judge what we can change and foresee what might arise. But rather that they would add much more value in the context of sound service provision. We also needed to give greater weight to the recognition that the models used to design systems invariably only drew on a small subset of what the practitioner can see when delivering services.