

COMMENT & ANALYSIS DISABILITY

Welcome, Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People. Still, challenges remain

3:12 pm on 4 July 2022

Share this

By Chris Ford *

Opinion - On Friday last week, the disability community of Aotearoa welcomed the launch of Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People.

It was a day that disabled people, including myself, had waited a long time for. Finally, our own ministry has come into being, the realisation of much collective advocacy over nearly 40 years.



Photo: Pixabay / befunky.com

As I watched online the official pōwhiri to open the new ministry, I reflected back on the day in 1988 when I moved a motion at a Labour Party Youth Conference that the then fourth Labour government establish such an entity. Unbeknownst to me, many other disabled individuals and organisations were doing the same, most notably, Disabled Persons Assembly (DPA), the organisation I now work for.

All of these calls went unheeded for decades, that is until the outcomes of the present Labour government's Health and Disability System Review were handed down in June 2020.

Admittedly, the review report came out just as the country and the world were in the first round of the fight against Covid-19, but that did not stop disabled people from stating that the outcomes of the review excluded us and it was time for disability to be separated from the health sector - where it had been since the National government's health reforms of the 1990s - once and for all.

In fact, I wrote my first opinion piece for RNZ on this very subject.

This concerted advocacy finally led late last year to the Cabinet decision that

we would get the new ministry that we as the disability community had long yearned for and that it would be an independent, stand-alone entity, with initial support coming from the Ministry for Social Development (MSD). The government also vested responsibility for the approximately \$1 billion per year disability support services budget - something that had previously been managed within the Ministry of Health - to the new ministry.

The road to the new ministry has not been all smooth sailing, however. In late 2021, just as the country was about to head into the festive break, MSD announced

the appointment of a non-disabled person, Justine Cornwall, to temporarily head it. I and many other disabled community leaders openly criticised this choice, given it violated one of the core tenets of the disability rights movement of 'nothing about us, without us' in that any decisions on disability-related matters should be taken by disabled people ourselves.

I can say that all this advocacy has paid off with the Public Service Commission stating that their preferred candidate for the permanent chief executive role is a disabled person who cannot (due to needing to be released from their current employment) take up the role at present. While it's disappointing this person cannot start straight away, it's still very heartening the appointee will be a disabled person - probably only the second disabled person that I know of to head a government agency in this country. This is something to savour and celebrate and I look forward to finding out who the appointee will be.



Minister for Disability Issues Poto Williams took over the portfolio three weeks ago. Photo: RNZ / Angus Dreaver

Nevertheless, great challenges await the chief executive designate and newly minted Minister for Disability Issues, Poto Williams (and, indeed, all their successors) - due to the list of issues that the new ministry will have to confront being so long.

The new ministry has been charged with, for example, leading the rollout of the Enabling Good Lives (EGL) principles around delivering disability supports to ensure they become more flexible and responsive to disabled people around the country.

The ministry will also oversee the passage of accessibility legislation which - while it's great to have - could still lack teeth, a concern causing a great deal of anxiety in the disability community ahead of its introduction to Parliament later this month. It could prove to be the ministry's first real test as a new entity.

Moreover, I hope they will provide strong advice on how to resolve the longstanding inequities between disabled clients of ACC and Ministry of Health disability support services, the huge pay and employment gaps which exist between disabled and non-disabled people, the enduring poverty that many disabled people confront on a daily basis, and the lack of representation of disabled people at all levels of government and much else besides.

I have been disappointed to see, though, that the issues of housing for disabled people will not be placed with the new ministry. I do hope, though, that the new ministry will be able to work alongside existing government agencies to effect policy change which will flow across the whole of government.

In this respect, I think of the influence that the Ministry for Women has had since its inception in the mid-1980s, having furnished advice which has begun to narrow the gender pay gap (albeit, slowly) and ensure more opportunities for women emerge within the economy and wider society.

Realistically, these changes are going to take time to filter through. I do understand that to a large extent no single government institution can effect change on its own. Collective grassroots disability advocacy and activism has gotten us this new ministry and other wins for disabled people down the decades. I have little doubt that grassroots activism and advocacy will continue to lead the way as it has always done for disabled people and other marginalised communities.

This activism will mean that Whaikaha, the Ministry of Disabled People, will be scrutinised over its actions from day one, that being last Friday. This means disabled people and our organisations will be seeking to working alongside the new ministry whilst, at the same time, holding it accountable.

Inevitably, this will mean that from time to time it might be criticised by disabled people like me, especially if it strays too far from its mission around the need to have disabled people at the centre of its policymaking and other operations. These considerations are the minimum bottom lines that our new ministry must maintain if it is to retain its credibility and relationships with the disability community going forward.

For now, though, Friday marked the beginning of a new era for disabled people in this country in that we now have a policymaking voice dedicated to us and one that will carry our voice even further into the hallways of power where we have not been fully heard in the past. The new ministry is a world first and it is my hope that it will lead the way for other countries to follow in our wake. I hope that in doing so that Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People will live up to its historic names and mission.

Nau mai, haere mai, welcome, Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People.

** Chris Ford is a Dunedin-based freelance writer and disability advocate. He currently works for Disabled Persons Assembly (DPA) New Zealand and as a research assistant for two universities. However, the views expressed in this article are wholly his own.*