RESEARCH TO IMPROVE THE UP-TAKE OF SERVICE BY PEOPLE CONSIDERED HARD TO REACH:

SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS AND A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR SERVICE INNOVATION

BACKGROUND

This paper is a synthesis of findings from a three year research programme led by ESR, in collaboration with researchers from the universities of Canterbury and Victoria in Wellington, and Indigemo Limited. The project was funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. The topic was "engaging with the 'hard to reach' to improve uptake of social and health service". Reports of case studies undertaken as part of the research, and other reports and publications are available at http://www.esr.cri.nz/social-science/

The researchers recognised that 'hard to reach' is a problematic way of thinking about potential clients of a service. The 'hard to reach' may not necessarily see themselves as 'hard to reach', and it may be services that are 'hard to reach'. The project chose to focus on 'making services reachable'. Following a typology published by Heatley (2016), the kind of programmes and agencies that have informed our findings, and for whom our findings are intended to be useful, are those that work with clients with complex needs (requiring multiple forms of support or intervention) and low capacity to "understand and manage their access to available services" (Heatley, 2016) [1]. Our data confirms that clients with complex needs tend to experience the services, rather than themselves, as being 'hard to reach'.

The research took an ecosystems approach, highlighting how uptake of service emerges from interaction between a social service, a client and the client's family, plus the wider service ecosystem (Figure 1).

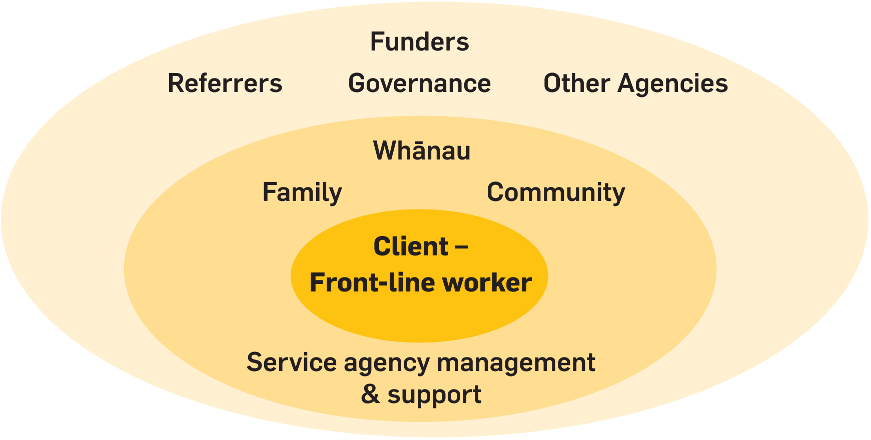

FIGURE 1: SERVICE AS AN ECOSYSTEM OF ACTORS

We present here three layers of findings from our study:

- a synthesis of factors that matter in supporting positive and sustained engagement between service agencies and their clients
- a model for improving the up-take of service by people considered hard to reach
- practical advice for service design and evaluation for improving engagement with clients, including six principles for designing social service engagement.

We have focused in this document on engagement between clients and service providers. Several aspects of our findings can, however, be applied to the service relationships at other levels of the service ecosystem (e.g., between funders and agencies, and between agencies and frontline workers).

FACTORS THAT MATTER

To support the up-take of service by people considered hard to reach, we focus on positive and sustained engagement between service agencies and their clients. Our findings suggest that key to positive and sustained engagement is an accommodation between the service provider-system and the client-system. We call this accommodation 'sufficient fit'. The 'provider-system' is the set of relationships that make up and influence the service that is offered. The 'client-system' is the set of relationships that make up and influence the service that is sought. In this paper we refer to service provider and client as a shorthand for provider-system and client-system. Sufficient fit is an idea that recognises that there are gaps that separate clients and those offering service (e.g., skill, attitude, knowledge, culture, life experience). Sufficient fit is a way of bridging such gaps well enough to overcome differences and find enough commonality and connection to enable a positive service experience for the client.

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[1] *While we agree with Heatley that clients may have diminished capacity to understand and manage access to services, we found that the up-take of value from service depends on engaging some capacity in clients, and that low up-take of service may not be a matter of low capacity but a matter of prior experience that has resulted in expectations, trust or perceptions that compromise potential engagement.*

We have clustered our findings under four headings: culture, framing and worldviews, capabilities and capitals, and behaviours and attributes.

Culture

Our findings suggest that issues of identity, identification and norms, roles and values are important in achieving sufficient fit between clients and service providers. Identity refers to the reputation and sense of identity held by providers and clients respectively. Identification refers to the extent to which clients can sense shared history, culture and worldview with providers. Norms, roles and values refer to the ways in which cultural assumptions are embedded in practice. These norms, roles and values may include expressions of ethnicity based culture. For example, for service seeking to engage Māori or Pasifika clients, specific cultural practices will be important. The service provider in our kaupapa Māori case study demonstrated eight kaupapa Māori principles:

1. **Tino Rangatiratanga:** The principle of self-determination
2. **Taonga Tuku Iho:** The principle of cultural aspiration
3. **Ako Māori:** The principle of culturally preferred pedagogy
4. **Kia piki ake i ngā raruraru o te kainga:** The principle of socio-economic mediation
5. **Whānau:** The principle of extended family structure
6. **Kaupapa:** The principle of collective philosophy
7. **Te Tiriti o Waitangi:** The principle of the Treaty of Waitangi
8. **Āta:** The principle of growing respectful relationships

Our case study in a Pacific setting demonstrated commitment to working with aiga[2], recognition of the various Pacific cultures and languages among the client group, and elements incorporated in the Pacific Health Research Guidelines (Health Research Council, 2014): communal relationships, reciprocity, holism and respect.

Framing and worldviews

Engagement is an active process influenced by how clients and providers view the process. Assumptions about what the 'problem' is that triggered a service relationship cannot be taken for granted. A referral or a presenting issue may not adequately or accurately represent how either the client or the provider sees the relationship. Assumptions about how the service relationship should be conducted also need to be tested and negotiated. For example, it can be important to consider how culture and history might influence service orientation and design to enhance engagement with the service.

Capabilities and capitals

'Capabilities and capitals' refers to the range of personal, social, organisational and material resources that each party to a service relationship can access and use in making engagement work. Important resources can be grouped under five headings: social capital, cultural capital, financial capital, professional capital and the organisational support that enables the various forms of capital.

Social capital refers to the network of relationships available to each party that effectively extends the range of resources available to each party if they were considered in isolation. Social capital is a factor for clients, front-line workers, and agencies. Cultural capital refers to the repertoire of sense-making frameworks available to each party.

Cultural capital is the way that identity and history shapes how communities and organisations understand and respond to their situation. Cultural capital includes frameworks of belief and practice that are ethnicity specific; it also includes other sources of belief and practice that can shape engagement.

Financial capital refers to the range of material resources available to each party to a service relationship.

Professional capital refers to the training, experience and skills of the front-line workers and service managers, including professional training and registration, as well as attributes such as tenacity, lived-experience, authenticity, and belief in the client.

Organisational support refers to the ways in which agencies, their funders and their governance support engagement with clients. Examples of organisational support include flexible and high-trust contracts, support for front-line workers' autonomy of practice, flexible models of engagement, and support for learning, adaptation and improvement.

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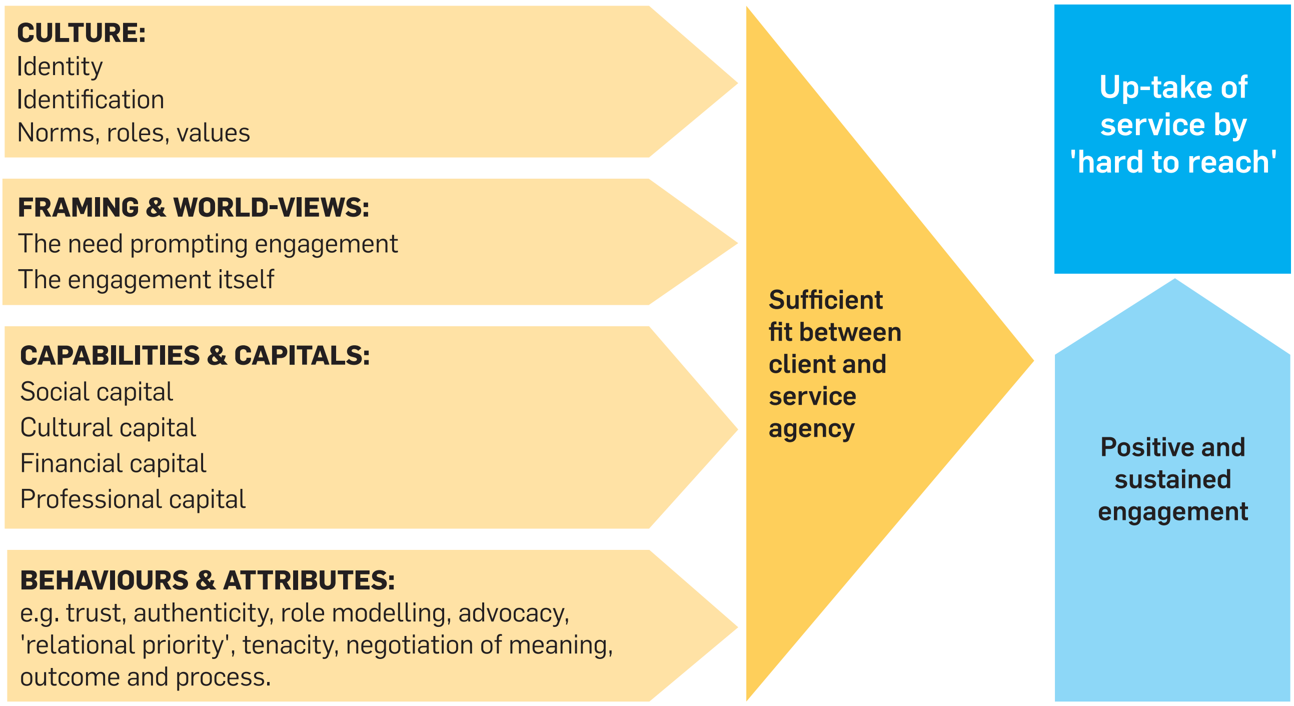
[2] *Aiga is a Samoan word that refers to extended family.*


CULTURE:
Identity
Identification
Norms, roles, values

FRAMING & WORLD-VIEWS:
The need prompting engagement
The engagement itself

CAPABILITIES & CAPITALS:
Social capital
Cultural capital
Financial capital
Professional capital

BEHAVIOURS & ATTRIBUTES:
e.g. trust, authenticity, role modelling, advocacy, 'relational priority', tenacity, negotiation of meaning, outcome and process.

Sufficient fit between client and service agency

Up-take of service by 'hard to reach'

Positive and sustained engagement

FIGURE 2: FACTORS AFFECTING UP-TAKE OF SERVICE

Behaviours and attributes

We have identified ten sets of behaviours or attributes important in achieving sufficient fit for positive and sustained engagement. These behaviours and attributes apply to service providers:

- Building and sustaining trust
- Authenticity (lived experience and/or relevance to the clients life and circumstances)
- Tenacity or persistence (the ability and will to sustain engagement, particularly when it seems difficult or unrewarding)
- Role modelling
- Advocacy
- Maintaining a 'relational priority' [3]
- Negotiation of meaning, outcome and process
- Negotiating and respecting 'reciprocal value propositions' [4]
- Being either a 'home base' [5], or helping the client navigate other services
- Offering practical help and/or connection with other community services

A MODEL OF ENGAGEMENT

Figure 2 is a synthesis of our findings highlighting aspects of the service ecosystem that influence strategic fit and therefore up-take of service.

Almost all the factors contributing to sufficient fit in Figure 2 can be applied in some way to each of the key actors in the service ecosystem: clients, frontline staff, service agencies, and funders.

The model in Figure 2 shows the up-take of service being dependent on positive and sustained engagement (with a client) which is dependent on achieving sufficient fit between a client and a service agency.

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[3] *The quality of relationship established between an agency (particularly frontline workers) and each client and their family has priority over the delivery of any programme content.*

[4] *A value proposition is the value that a provider seeks to deliver to customers. A reciprocal value proposition, in a service relationship, refers to a negotiation between a provider and client. Both parties share in creating value, as seen by the client (Ballantyne, Frow, Varey, & Payne, 2011).*

[5] *Using the established relationship with a particular agency or worker as a doorway to other service offerings.*

The model can be used by those seeking to design, improve or evaluate a programme or agency. The questions that the model poses are:

- To what extent does this service design, programme or agency demonstrate capabilities necessary for establishing sufficient fit with clients?
- What is the evidence that the four influencers of sufficient fit between client and service agency are in place, valued, resourced and implemented?

WHAT TO FOCUS ON – A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR SERVICE DESIGN AND EVALUATION

We propose a framework of four areas that service agencies can manage in order to enhance the likelihood of sufficient fit with their clients, and therefore support constructive and sustained engagement such that clients make positive use (up-take) of service.

The framework has been adapted from work by Robert Flood (1999). It consists of four windows through which to view a situation. Different aspects of the situation are able to be seen through each of the windows, together the windows provide an understanding of the situation that will assist action planning.

The four windows do not mirror exactly the four core influences on sufficient fit identified in Figure 2. The four windows, however, provide a framework for action for designing, improving or evaluating client-agency engagement in social services. There is no hard boundary separating the four windows; they do overlap and blend into one another, and service design or improvement needs to consider the insights from all four windows.

The four windows (with our adaptation for this project) are:

- **Structures for effectiveness** (how will rules, resources and operating procedures be designed and implemented to support sufficient fit between clients and those offering a service?)
- **Processes** for efficiency and reliability (what practices will help the service engagement to work smoothly, without unnecessary effort or cost for the parties?)
- **Meaning** (what will enable this activity or project to make sense to each of the parties to the service relationship?)
- **Power / Knowledge** (whose power, and whose knowledge and competence needs to be taken into account in establishing sufficient fit and, therefore, positive and sustained engagement, between client and those offering service?)

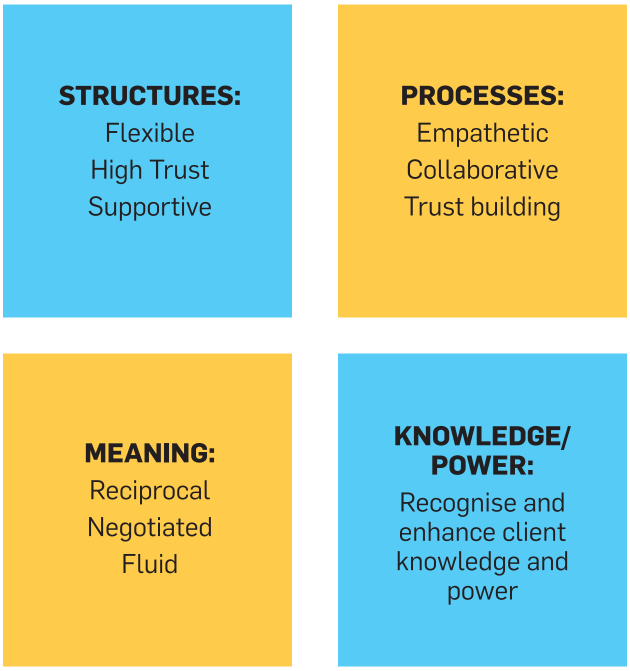

FIGURE 3: FOUR FOCUSES FOR SERVICE AGENCIES

STRUCTURES

The **structures** window relates to formal and informal rules, procedures, deployment of resources (the ways that funders, agencies and workers express *culture*[6]), and organisational support for necessary *behaviours and attributes.*

Structures to effectively support sufficient fit between clients that are deemed hard to reach, and those offering service to them, need to demonstrate three core attributes: they need to be flexible, high trust, and supportive.

Flexible structures

At each level of the system (funder-agency, agency management-frontline worker, worker-client) relationships need to be flexible enough to bridge between the distinct perspectives, needs, capacities and capabilities of the parties involved. For example, funders will have particular accountabilities and outcomes that drive their funding decisions; however, if funding contracts are not flexible about how the desired outcomes might be achieved, programmes will lack flexibility to work in tandem with other service offerings available through the agency or in the wider service eco-system. Or, if agency management is overly rigid in how frontline workers are to practice, workers will lack flexibility to work with the perceptions, needs, capacities and capabilities of particular clients. If frontline workers are inflexibly committed to a narrow model of practice, they will fail to adapt to the particularity of their client. Finally, by way of example, if clients are very conditioned by their past negative experience or expectations of service agencies they may fail to adjust to the service relationship they are offered.

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[6] *In this section, italicised words provide a link back to the model in Figure 2.*

High trust structures

One approach to establishing flexible structures is through 'high trust' contracts and relationships. In high trust relationships the focus is on confidence that there is sufficient alignment between the parties on three dimensions: agreed outcome, willingness to work for the outcome, and capability to deliver the outcome. The opposite of high trust relationships is micro-management.

The idea of high trust relationships can provide a basis for relationships between funder and agency, management and frontline, and frontline and client. In each case the degree of trust will need to be measured and proportionate to a realistic estimate of alignment on agreed outcome, willingness to work for the outcome, and capability to deliver the outcome. For example, a high trust funding contract will focus on agreed ends but leave the means of delivery to the agency. A high trust worker-client relationship will focus on negotiated recovery goals before concerning itself with programmes and processes to achieve them.

Supportive structures

A key expression of flexible and high trust structures is the measure of support that each actor experiences from others in the system. For example, agencies, frontline workers and clients all exist within an ecosystem of other actors that can support, complement, or undermine their efforts. For the client, such structures are likely to include their whānau/ aiga/ family and community. For frontline workers, such structures will include collegiality within an immediate or an extended community of practice, and the provision or organisation support and infrastructure that allows them to focus on their clients. For agencies, supportive structures will include reciprocal relationships with other agencies, and forms of accountability that, while robust, are tailored to the nature of their work and context.

PROCESSES

The **processes** window relates to the processes of implicit and explicit negotiation with clients that underpins *identification*, alignment of *norms, roles and values* [7], and establishing *trust* and empathy [8].

Efficiency and reliability in establishing sufficient fit in the service relationship depends, in large part, on some degree of identification between clients and workers, and establishing trust, empathy and collaborative processes.

Building Trust

Our case studies demonstrated how fundamental a relationship of trust is in establishing sufficient fit between clients and agencies offering service. Trust is an outcome of various factors, not an activity; but once trust is present it helps other processes to work more smoothly in establishing sufficient fit between clients and those offering service. Trust in a relationship is a kind of social capital, and once established in a relationship enhances the participants' capacity to sustain and benefit from the relationship. While we have focused on trust in the immediate relationship with the client, building trust is relevant to other relationships in the service ecosystem too, such as between providers in a sector and between funders and a provider.

Empathic processes

Empathic processes are processes that take seriously the world of the other in a relationship. Empathic processes, therefore, would attempt to accommodate the particular perspectives, experience, capability, and constraints of the other party in a relationship. Empathic processes help achieving sufficient fit between clients and those offering service.

Collaborative processes

Collaborative processes add social capital, and therefore capability, to those in a service engagement because they function within supportive relationships. For clients, collaborative processes will recognise that they are not solitary beings, and live in relationships and community. For frontline workers collaborative processes will ensure that they are well connected with their peers, and will function to support both a community of practice and appropriate division of labour. For agencies collaborative processes ensure that their distinctive service is set within an ecosystem of other service, thereby serving clients better and allowing a division of labour.

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[7] *Culture, in Figure 2.*

[8] *Behaviours and attributes, in Figure 2.*

MEANING

The **meaning** window relates to a sense of *identity*[9] and ways in which situations and relationships are framed[10].

Meaning, or the way in which we make sense of experience, is very powerful in shaping attitude and practice. It cannot be assumed that the meaning of a service is the same for each of the parties involved. For example, funders, agency owners, agency management, frontline workers, clients and clients' families may each see the meaning of a service engagement differently. A useful way of thinking of the meaning of service is that for positive and sustained engagement, the various parties each bring and negotiate their own meaning. The aim is what can be called a 'reciprocal value propositions': "if I offer this, will you offer that". Such reciprocity and negotiation remains fluid or dynamic throughout the relationship. This also requires improvisation and the ability to quickly recognise emergent opportunities for growth and change.

Negotiated

To facilitate sufficient fit between parties in a service ecosystem meaning needs to be negotiated. This means that shared meaning cannot be assumed, and differing senses of meaning may need to be accommodated.

Fluid

Meaning is being continuously applied, consciously or unconsciously, to the service relationship by all parties. Positive and sustained engagement depends on negotiating sufficient alignment of meaning over time.

KNOWLEDGE/POWER

The *knowledge / power* window relates to *capabilities* and *capitals.*

While it is inevitably a feature of social and health service relationships that those offering the service hold greater power and knowledge not immediately available to the client, service depends on the client and the client's support system 'integrating' resources from the relationship into their own lives or circumstances. The ability to do this, and therefore the ability of clients to enter and make use of positive and sustained engagement with those offering service, depends on some pre-existing capabilities. These can be thought of as social, cultural and financial capital. The aim of the service engagement with those with complex needs and low capacity to understand and manage access to services is to recognise, and enhance client knowledge and power; the goal is to strengthen the ability of such clients to better negotiate and navigate the support they need from this and other services.

SIX PRINCIPLES FOR DESIGNING SOCIAL SERVICE ENGAGEMENT WITH THOSE DEEMED HARD TO REACH

1. Service is not a service product delivered. Service is an experience in which a service seeker benefits by accessing resources offered by another.
2. Service (co-)design is about reciprocal values of the parties involved, not merging or agreeing on values.
3. Structures and processes need to be (co-)designed to enable and support negotiated meaning and empowerment.
4. Capability and social, cultural and financial capital is needed from all parties – service needs to recognise, enhance and build capability and capital with clients.
5. Engagement with clients with complex needs is about negotiating core assumptions with them on the purpose, course and context of service offered.
6. Negotiation of core assumptions is needed in every key relationship in service provision, and is ongoing and dynamic.

For more information

For more information, including the project reports and outputs, please see; http://www.esr.cri.nz/social-science/
Email: jeff.foote@esr.cri.nz

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Jeff Foote, Virginia Baker, Maria Hepi and Graeme Nicholas – Institute of Environmental Science and Research Limited (ESR)

Moana-o-Hinerangi, Indigemo Limited

Sue Carswell and Jörg Finsterwalder, University of Canterbury

Tua Taueetia-Su'a, Victoria University of Wellington

The project was funded by MBIE research contract C03X1301 and has been supported by Superu.

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[9] *Culture, in Figure 2.*

[10] *Framing and world-views, in Figure 2.*

INSTITUTE OF ENVIRONMENTAL
SCIENCE AND RESEARCH LIMITED

Kenepuru Science Centre
34 Kenepuru Drive, Kenepuru, Porirua 5022
PO Box 50348, Porirua 5240
New Zealand
T: +64 4 914 0700 **F:** +64 4 914 0770

Mt Albert Science Centre
120 Mt Albert Road, Sandringham, Auckland 1025
Private Bag 92021, Auckland 1142
New Zealand
T: +64 9 815 3670 **F:** +64 9 849 6046

NCBID – Wallaceville
66 Ward Street, Wallaceville, Upper Hutt 5018
PO Box 40158, Upper Hutt 5140
New Zealand
T: +64 4 529 0600 **F:** +64 4 529 0601

Christchurch Science Centre
27 Creyke Road, Ilam, Christchurch 8041
PO Box 29181, Christchurch 8540
New Zealand
T: +64 3 351 6019 **F:** +64 3 351 0010

www.esr.cri.nz

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ESR0317