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| I am writing to you today because I have made some significant announcements on legislation aimed at protecting our most vulnerable children. I know you have taken an active interest in this issue through the Green and White Papers on Vulnerable Children which formed the basis for the Children’s Action Plan.   I think the most important work I will ever do as a Minister is the work contained in the Children’s Action Plan. It fundamentally changes the way we work with children and how we protect the most vulnerable.   I feel a deep sense of responsibility for the thousands of children who are hurt and abused in this country. More than fifty children have died in the last five years because of extreme abuse. Because of abuse, a child under two is hospitalised every five days. Every year there are 22,000 substantiated cases of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect.  There is an enormous amount of work underway for the Children’s Action Plan.  • We have a National Children’s Director in place.  • Two Children’s Teams; Rotorua is up and running and Whangarei is nearly there. • A Vulnerable Children’s Board of Chief Executives has been operating for months.   And we’re working on:  • A care strategy for children in State care • The child protect line • The Vulnerable Kid’s Information System  • Increasing the pool of iwi caregivers  The Children’s Action Plan is a ten year plan to take those next big steps forward. Today I have announced proposed legislation that gives power to that plan.   This is the most significant legislative reform in this area since 1989 when the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act was introduced. This legislation contains major and far reaching changes and also strengthens our commitment to children whose lives have already been damaged.   The Chief Executives of five government agencies will be accountable for vulnerable children. This will set clear performance expectations for Chief Executives; they’ll have to report annually and answer to Ministers directly on their part in a cross agency plan for these children.  Never before in this country have the Chief Executives of Health, Education, Police, and Justice, as well the Ministry of Social Development had specific accountability together, for vulnerable children.  This will significantly change the way they work because they’ll have to ensure they’re improving the wellbeing of vulnerable children, protecting them from abuse and taking a child-centred approach. Together they’ll design a cross agency plan for vulnerable children which they’ll have to report on annually and report to Ministers on the action they’re taking.  **Screening and Vetting** We will introduce minimum standards for screening and vetting of every government worker in the children’s workforce.  This covers the core workforce, e.g. paediatricians, teachers, Child, Youth and Family social workers and children’s counsellors as well as the wider children’s workforce e.g. non-teaching staff, library reading group leaders and Work and Income case managers. All up, it’s more than 370,000 people.  Minimum standards for screening and vetting will identify potential abusers. It will include specific interview techniques, thorough reference and Police record checks as well as the history and behaviour of every one of those individuals. It’ll also mean checking with former employers and wider community members about any concerns relating to children.   This will be mandatory for all government agencies and any government-funded organisations working with children and voluntary for wider community organisations. Agencies will be required to do a thorough risk assessment with periodic reassessments every three years.  **Children’s Workforce Restrictions** In conjunction with the changes outlined to screening and vetting we will introduce restrictions on people who have serious convictions, such as murder, manslaughter, sexual violation, assault on a child and sexual conduct with young people, stopping them entering the children’s workforce. There will be serious consequences if organisations fail to comply with these restrictions.   It’s critically important we get this list right and I’m asking the select committee to explore this further and allow the public to have a say, however we simply have to protect our vulnerable children from these serious offenders.  **Child Harm Prevention Orders** There are cases where children have been abused because a dangerous individual got close enough to do so, sometimes literally by moving into their home.  A High Court or District Court will be able to place these new civil orders on adults with a history of serious convictions who pose a high risk of abusing children. This could also include cases where it’s believed the person was responsible for the serious abuse or death of a child on the balance of probabilities. These orders can restrict people from living with children and going to places where children often are – like parks, and working or associating with children.  **Subsequent Children** Currently, it’s only when abusive parents have a subsequent child and come to the attention of Child, Youth and Family that the child’s safety is assessed and if Child, Youth and Family believe the child is unsafe, it has to prove that to the Court. We will reverse that burden of proof.   In cases where children have previously been killed or have survived the worst examples of abuse, the parent will have to prove, that their child is safe in their care. It is the unfortunate reality that some children are at risk from the day they’re born.  Through a clear process, Child, Youth and Family will provide an assessment to the Family Court, which then makes the ultimate decision. Parents of course will have a part in that process and can always appeal decisions.  **Curtail rights of parents whose children were placed into a Home For Life**  We introduced Home for Life in 2010. If a child can’t be with their parents, we find them a permanent Home for Life. We know permanency is vital - and a Home for Life family can provide the love and stability that the child desperately needs. It is a step below adoption, so birth parents retain a number of rights to maintain a connection to the child.  Unfortunately, some birth parents exploit those rights and create instability and emotional turmoil for the caregiving families and children. This happens with parents who veto overseas holidays – so a week-long trip to Australia, which might be the first holiday that child has ever had, can be sabotaged. It happens with vexatious attempts to drag out court cases, some of which can be played out over many years – leaving the child in a constant state of unease over their future. It also happens with weekend visits from particularly aggressive or manipulative parents who seek to undermine the new family home.   Right now we have only either very light or very heavy handed options to address this. Under this new legislation Family Court Judges will have a new tool. It’ll mean Judges can set specific guardianship rights that are proportionate to that individual child and their new family.   **Conclusion** I realise that these changes might be controversial. They are significant and will make a fundamental difference to protecting the most vulnerable children and allowing them to thrive.  I want to reiterate, what I’ve announced today are the legislative elements of the Children Action Plan – this is part of a large, moving body of changes that are underway.   This legislation is planned to be introduced in the next few weeks and there will of course be a full select committee process. I would like you stay involved and have a say on this legislation. As always we’re listening and open to changes in the Bill – but we’re equally determined to take action and make a real difference.   Thank you for your commitment over the last few years, we need to keep working together to ensure we have the best protection in place for those children who need it the most.  More information is available on the Children’s Action Plan website:[www.childrensactionplan.govt.nz](http://www.childrensactionplan.govt.nz/).   All the best, and where possible I encourage you to take part in the Select Committee process.    **Hon Paula Bennett** |

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