

Voices from Canterbury: Experiences in shared crisis and recovery

We find ourselves in a moment that's without precedent – something that exceeds our shared history as a nation and something that will extend its shadow over our future for some time to come.

CARL BILLINGTON spoke to people with different roles in the Canterbury region to collect their reflections on the current pandemic and some of the lessons we can take from their experiences of surviving crisis and trauma.

A track record of surviving adversity

“Unfortunately, as a region, we do have a long track record of managing in adverse times,” Jim Palmer, Chief Executive Waimakariri District Council, reflects.

“At the same time, most of us are unfortunately tinged with the reality that recovery is going to take much longer than people tend to anticipate at the start.”



Jim Palmer

Experience suggests we're in for a long, collective effort.

“Working together is much more efficient, but it's also quite comforting – nobody's got all the answers and we have a much better chance of getting the right outcome together,” Ben Clark, Regional Commissioner for the Department of Corrections, adds.

Recovery or transformation?

Evon Currie, General Manager of Community and Population Health for Canterbury District Health Board, picks up this theme.

“The term BAU [business as usual] has to disappear. There is no such thing – we can't return to who, or how, we were

before the crisis. What we do have though is the ability to shape a new future.”



Evon Currie

Yet despite the opportunity Currie highlights, the lockdown experience has left many hankering for the past and a return to what's been taken from us – something perhaps symbolised in the 5am queues that formed outside McDonald's outlets the day we transitioned out of Level 4.

**EXPERIENCE
SUGGESTS WE'RE
IN FOR A LONG,
COLLECTIVE EFFORT.**

Ben Clark explains: “In any trauma or crisis, there are elements of our old life we're inclined to cling to for assurance and comfort. Yet our longer-term adjustment depends on us being able to move forward.

“In that sense, recovery is probably not the right language. I prefer renewal. We need to build on and acknowledge the past but still move forward in new ways. In Christchurch, talking about recovery

after the earthquakes wasn't realistic. We'd lost all of our physical landmarks, the demographics of our population changed dramatically – it was impossible to go back to how it was.

“By focusing on renewal together, it stops you hankering after something you can never regain.”

**IN ANY TRAUMA OR
CRISIS, THERE ARE
ELEMENTS OF OUR
OLD LIFE WE'RE
INCLINED TO CLING
TO FOR ASSURANCE
AND COMFORT.**

Jim Palmer agrees: “BAU doesn't exist. We need to shift from thinking about *business as usual* to thinking about *business as new*.

“People are going to be under a lot of stress as the impacts of the lockdown begin to show, and communities are going to be looking for solutions. People will vent their anger at us, but it's really important we're able to remain calm ourselves.

“It isn't easy and it isn't fair, but that's the nature of leading through a crisis – it requires good leadership on steroids.”

Interestingly, and in strong contrast to the earthquakes, the one thing that has thrived rather than suffered as a result of the coronavirus is the natural environment.

Gabrielle Huria, member of Ngai Tūāhuriri hapū and Canterbury District Health Board Deputy Chair, adds, “The tūi and fantails are thriving; our environment has been given a rest. It's a real wake

up. There's no way forward without the environment being part of that. We've been given quite an amazing opportunity to reconsider the contribution we're making to its destruction."



Gabrielle Huria

Evon Currie adds, "The lockdown has given us a taste of scarcity in consumer goods but also removed the poverty of time many of us experienced. We've gone without takeaways and coffees for over a month. We've seen an amazing resurgence in home baking and people walking their neighbourhoods. Gardens are thriving, and pets have never had so much attention. This is what a consumer-less society looks like."

**RECOVERY IS
PROBABLY NOT THE
RIGHT LANGUAGE. I
PREFER RENEWAL.**

"We've had to rely on each other rather than our ability to just purchase things we want or need. It's worth taking a moment to consider how we want to hold onto some of these things before rushing back to consumerism as a way of living."

That strengthened connection to the local environment and local community has a range of implications for public servants and how they can assist local communities.

Resilience is local

"We need to be really cautious of taking a paternalistic approach – it creeps in unconsciously in approaches that imply some programme or agency is going to look after our communities, when the truth is that communities look after themselves," Jim Palmer explains.

"Some levers need to be set nationally, but then we need local flexibility to be able to understand and respond to the nuanced challenges different communities are facing."

"That's where communities caring for themselves and leading or at least guiding the response gives a finer-grained understanding and empathy," Palmer adds.

**THERE'S NO WAY
FORWARD WITHOUT
THE ENVIRONMENT
BEING PART OF THAT.**

Gabrielle Huria gives a perfect example: "We have 2,000 acres of Māori land between Rangiora and Christchurch, divided into 14-acre blocks. When people's houses were destroyed in the quake, they needed places to come back to, but the local regulations meant only one dwelling could be built on each block."

"That meant only one household could resettle here. Families were divided, some moved into town, others couldn't care for their elders any more. It was devastating."

"But we worked with the district council to simplify the regulations to allow us to build on our tribal land. Together we found a solution that enabled us to subdivide and build cluster houses, addressing a bone of contention for many years."

However, Ben Clark notes there are tensions to manage: "Local providers need to give central authorities confidence that they can deliver, but at the same time, it's the local agencies that know where the need is, and they need to

be given the freedom to influence where the resource goes."



Ben Clark

"These were hard-learned lessons in the past, and we need to do this better with COVID."

**LOCAL PROVIDERS
NEED TO GIVE
CENTRAL
AUTHORITIES
CONFIDENCE THAT
THEY CAN DELIVER.**

Trust is personal

"This is a national event, but the nuancing across regions means we also need to empower regional teams to respond to what they're seeing in front of them," Palmer adds.

"That requires trusting those at the coalface and giving them clear authority



to make decisions. This can sit in tension with the natural risk aversion of central agencies that don't want to make a decision that could embarrass their minister or the government of the day."

In Jim's eyes, the key to building trust is building relationships.

"Relationships are fundamental. They enable cross-agency collaboration, which can't happen without trust. Real relationships are personal connections; they can't just be functional – that's a business arrangement, and it doesn't build the sort of goodwill we need.

"If I pick up the phone and talk to John Henderson at MSD and tell him I need a favour, he'll want to respond, and vice versa. It's damn hard not to because of the personal connection we've built. To achieve that, you have to invest in the people in the agencies, not just the entity," Palmer adds.

Rippling impacts

"With COVID-19, we faced an immediate health emergency. Rightly, a lot of the effort has gone into limiting the impact of that health outbreak, but as things progress, we're going to see cycles of other issues emerge," Palmer continues.

"We saw the first cycle with the immediate layoffs and redundancies. We'll see another when the 12-week wage subsidy expires, and another when the world economy kicks in."

Each of those creates their own waves.

"The health challenges will change too as more of the psycho-social effects start to kick in. From our experience, it can be up to two years before you get to the bottom of those ripples and another two before we start to see what business as new looks like," Palmer adds.

"You've got to adapt. Within one year after the Canterbury earthquake, we were already on the fifth version of our recovery plan," Palmer recalls.

"This will be the same. It can be disheartening. We can learn from past experience though and build this into our thinking."

Ben Clark agrees: "It's iterative and individually different.

"Typically, the most vulnerable are the most significantly impacted by adverse events – particularly health-related ones. Those with existing co-morbidities, in crowded living situations, or who encounter difficulty accessing health care tend to be more adversely impacted. We need to anticipate this and have a wider safety net in place," Clark adds.

"But what we'll also see are a number of others who've never been unemployed and never had to draw aid from the government now needing support and needing to figure out how to navigate the system. It's changing the demographic profile of those who need to draw on support from the state.

"One potential silver lining is it may reduce some of the stigmatism attached to those who find themselves in need of help.

"What helps is a collective understanding of the trauma experience. If you can see yourself as part of a shared normal response to abnormal events, that can foster a much wider degree of empathy and acceptance.

"A lot of people are going to need to reach out for help. It's hard to do that when you feel stigmatised or blamed for doing so. We're going to be cycling through these stages – we need to anticipate this and create clear pathways for those in need and foster an attitude that supports their progress if we want to get to a common end point together."

Evon Currie puts it this way: "This is about our whole society getting behind the idea of ensuring no one gets left behind."

Encouraging signs

There are already some great signs of the things communities are putting in place to ensure no one gets left behind.

Gabrielle Huria explains: "Two weeks into COVID-19, our marae became a testing station. We realised not everyone would be able to make a 20-minute bus ride to a testing station in the city, so we set one up here, with a local NGO on-site as well. People could drive in and get tested and then stop by the NGO at the next station for a food voucher or to talk with a health or social worker. We saw around 80

people a day and collected their contacts in case any follow-up was needed."

A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE GOING TO NEED TO REACH OUT FOR HELP.

Jim Palmer points to another post-quake initiative as an example of other ways to encourage participation across the community: "Following the quakes, the city ran a 'share an idea' campaign. Thousands of people came forward to put physical or virtual stickies on a communal ideas board for what they would like to see in a rebuilt city. It gave people the opportunity to shape a shared future together and start lifting their eyes from the tragedy to the opportunity.

"Not everybody will be in a place to contribute though, and you have to recognise that. The idea is to work with those who are in the space to engage and accept that others won't be in a position to engage for some time and that's OK too."

John Henderson from MSD reflects on the challenge of caring for the country's 156,000 over 70-year-olds who live alone and were instructed to stay home during the lockdown.

"We identified those who are older and live alone as a key vulnerable group we need to connect with. We've spoken with 90,000 people already and have been able to refer 2,500 for additional support they might not have received otherwise.

"It's a carefully crafted phone conversation to explain why we're ringing and explore what support is needed. The initiative is co-ordinated by MSD but delivered through local councils and NGOs," Henderson explains.





John Henderson

“We had a call in another region where the caller noted the client had a big birthday coming up. The caller rang back on the day to sing them happy birthday.

“We’re seeing the very best of human motivation and a real spirit of service coming to the fore. It’s really heartwarming. We’ve seen it in the past, and we’re seeing it again now.”

Evon Currie adds to this: “One of our local Pacific providers, the Tangata Atumotu Trust, discovered a lot of their Pacific patients didn’t have internet, so they started using a lot of phone contact, and their staff would end each call by singing with the clients over the phone.

“People aren’t just going through routine conversations. They’re really listening and picking up on what people need and referring them on – genuinely connecting, communicating, and supporting. This is exactly what we need.”

Closing thoughts

Alongside the pain and trauma a crisis brings, it also offers a unique opportunity to reset our priorities and perceptions.

For Evon Currie, “It’s all about people. That balance between economics and people will be a huge question going forward. Are we rebuilding our economy to enable people to have full and interesting lives, or are we wanting people to become productive again so they can serve our economy?”

“What would a people-centred design look like as we rebuild our way of life? I wouldn’t want to see us lose the opportunity to consider these sorts of questions as we begin to reset society again.”

Ben Clark raises another set of questions: “The challenge is there are many people in our communities who aren’t that connected in the good times, so rushing to connect them in a crisis isn’t easy if they don’t have the foundation of those relationships and the goodwill.

“You need to foster that in advance and find ways to hardwire it in, otherwise

we run the risk of slipping back into functioning in our silos once the pressure is off.

“A key challenge for any of us in the public sector is figuring out how to distil what enables us to operate in solidarity in a crisis and retain and implement that outside the crisis moment.

**THE CHALLENGE IS
THERE ARE MANY
PEOPLE IN OUR
COMMUNITIES
WHO AREN’T THAT
CONNECTED IN THE
GOOD TIMES.**

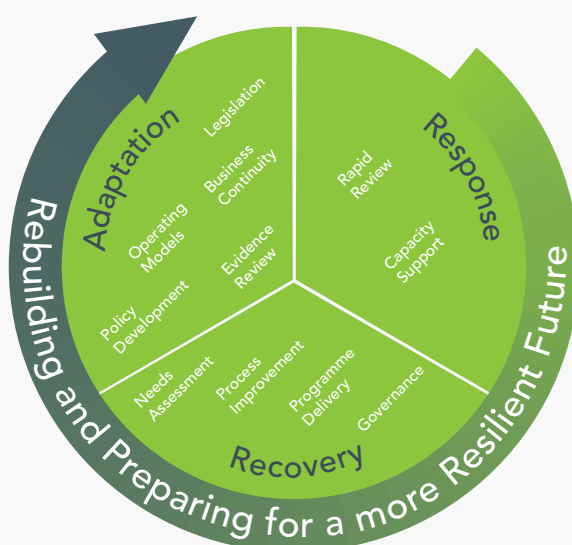
“Answering this question is all about building enduring relationships that enable us to come together in genuine partnership, not just take an advocacy position around the discussion table.”

As public servants, this moment in time presents many challenges, but also opportunities. What we make of them will, at least in some part, be determined by how well we learn from the experiences of those who’ve been here before us.

Need to pivot operations? We can help

Our world has changed and operations need to adapt to our new normal.

We understand the challenges of resuming work while responding to new priorities and ways of working.



Timely and targeted support can help you rapidly revitalise and optimise your operations.

This is an opportunity to prepare for a more resilient future.



ALLEN+CLARKE

Partnering with New Zealand’s Public and Private Sector leaders for 20 years

We give a damn.