

FROM FOOD PARCELS TO FOOD RESILIENCE



**healthy
families**
Hutt Valley
He oranga whānau

HUTT CITY
TE AWA KAIRANGI

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hutt City Council and Healthy Families Hutt Valley would like to acknowledge the following organisations for their valuable input and continued support towards creating food secure and food resilient communities: Common Unity Project Aotearoa, Family Works, Kaibosh, Kokiri Marae, Koraunui Marae, Lower Hutt Foodbank, Oasis Church, Oasis Network, Pomare Community Trust House, Salvation Army, St Matthew's Anglican Church Taita, Stokes Valley Foodbank, Te Huinga O Te Whānau, Te Kakano O Te Aroha Marae, Te Piringa O Te Awakairangi, Tuatahi Centre, Vulnerable Support Charitable Trust, Wainuiomata Marae, Waiwhetu Marae, Wellington City Mission and Wesley Community Action.

INTRODUCTION

The unfolding threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and evolving national and local response presented unprecedented challenges to our emergency response system and processes.

The unique combination of challenges included:

- an infectious disease as opposed to common civil emergencies such as floods, storm damage, earthquakes
- a four week lockdown and social distancing
- a volunteer base that was largely required to quarantine
- financial impact on those who were already struggling and the emergence of newly vulnerable citizens who up until then had been managing

While New Zealand has done well in eliminating COVID-19 we are warned to remain vigilant to further mutations or a second wave of infections. The Director General of Health states that "we are still very early in the evolution of this pandemic globally." Further, scientists warn that changing global weather patterns along with densely populated urban areas may lead to more infectious diseases. We are also mindful that another civil emergency, such as an earthquake would significantly challenge the resilience of our system.

Of particular concern, our system was stretched to meet the most basic of human needs – access to food. The pandemic highlighted existing inequities in access to food and further exacerbated them.

For these reasons, Hutt City Council wanted to reflect on Lower Hutt's experience of providing and distributing emergency food parcels and capture learnings to improve the response system. Furthermore, Council wants to address existing food insecurity in our communities and build a more resilient and equitable food system.

BACKGROUND

In the days leading up to Level 4 lockdown, it became apparent that emergency food distributors faced challenges to meet immediate and emerging demand. A Council officer led the co-ordination of Council's food response and interacted with organisations providing food parcels including Common Unity Project Aotearoa, Family Works, Kaibosh, Kokiri Marae, Koraunui Marae, Lower Hutt Foodbank, Oasis Church, Oasis Network, Pomare Community Trust House, Salvation Army, St Matthew's Anglican Church Taita, Stokes Valley Foodbank, Te Huinga O Te Whanau, Te Kakano O Te Aroha Marae, Te Piringa O Te Awakairangi, Tuatahi Centre, Vulnerable Support Charitable Trust, Wainuiomata Marae, Wellington City Mission and Wesley Community Action.

Hutt City Council's Projects and Relationships team and Healthy Families Hutt Valley agreed to work together to review the emergency food response and capture learnings to enhance current and future response.

This review captures findings of an initial questionnaire completed by food providers and insights from related meetings and conversations during the COVID-19 period of alert Levels 2-4.

Questionnaire

In early May, a questionnaire was sent to organisations providing food parcels asking for input based on four questions:

1. Barriers and issues you faced e.g. funding application, unclear communication about operating, accessing help etc.
2. Lessons learnt that would be useful to inform a city wide response.
3. Solutions you think would work moving forward.
4. As the needs increase and the funds reduce, how can we work together as kai providers and what part do you think Council could play in this?

Participants were offered the option of replying in writing or a phone conversation. The email was followed up with a phone call from two members of the Healthy Families Hutt Valley team to those who had not responded and some opted to talk and have their comments written up. The responses were collated and each given an identifying number to provide anonymity. There were responses from 18 of the 20 organisations.

Food Relief Response Zoom Meeting

In late May, a meeting with emergency food providers was initiated by the Lower Hutt Mayor Campbell Barry. The meeting was held in the context of the COVID-19 response shifting to Level 2 and moving from a National State of Emergency to a National Transition for Recovery. This meant the closing of the Lower Hutt Emergency Operation Centre and the welfare activity being picked up by Hutt City Council.

The Mayor wanted to acknowledge the efforts of kai providers and hear how we could continue to meet the ongoing demand for support, as well as create a more sustainable food system for Lower Hutt.

Along with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Lower Hutt, participants included representation from Common Unity Project Aotearoa, Family Works, Kaibosh, Kokiri Marae, Koraunui Marae, Lower Hutt Foodbank, Piringa O Te Awakairangi, Pomare Community Trust, Salvation Army, Stokes Valley Foodbank, Tuatahi Centre and Waiwhetū Marae.

LEARNINGS

This section summarises common themes that emerged from the questionnaire, meeting and conversations.

Issues and barriers in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic

The demand for emergency food was overwhelming.

The emergency food provider sector was initially overwhelmed by multiple factors including the closing down of facilities, the loss of volunteers (particularly those over 70), lack of information and resource to meet the need.

There was an information and communication gap in the early response period.

There was a lag between the immediate and emerging need and the operational response from national, regional and local Emergency Operations Centre/Welfare arm.

Many community groups anticipated and responded to the unfolding and immediate need well before they were resourced or supported to do so.

While food was the main focus of support, many households also needed support for rent, power, phones, clothes, transport, medicine, shopping and blankets.

An initial lack of awareness of Council's Emergency Operations Centre and its Welfare arm as well as available support and processes to access that support.

There were double ups and unsolicited food parcels.

Assessment processes were inconsistent and sometimes prohibitive for whānau.

Volunteers could have benefited from training and advice (food hygiene and how to operate safely), access to PPE and an ID to show to the Police.

Some had to abandon facilities and technology infrastructure and operate from further away or homes, sheds and garages.

Access to community gardens was restricted during lockdown.

People in motels or temporary accommodation didn't have access to microwaves to heat up meals.

There is volunteer fatigue.

Small organisations sometimes had issues with technology support when they had to leave their premises.

The pandemic induced response highlighted and exacerbated existing hardship and inequities in our community.

Some in our community fear mainstream organisations and will only engage and give information to a trusted person.

What could be done better in a similar emergency?

Council could play a lead role in co-ordination and communication.

Point-of-contact person be able to refer people to support for other needs expressed e.g. financial, transport, medical, shopping, clothes, blankets.

Have a local discussion about what is considered an essential service, activity and/or facility e.g. hubs, local shops.

Grow the volunteer base.

Stream line the assessment process with fewer questions.

Provide up to date information on support and resources available to agencies.

Agree on a best practice way to engage with those in need.

Communicate available support to communities through official and unofficial channels including radio.

Consider a click & collect process for some families.

Central government funding distributed more evenly and not only to the large charities.

Advance warning and discussions about reduction or cessation of current levels of support.

What is plan B if power or the internet goes down?

Distribute through those best connected to those in need - the right face through the best channels.

INSIGHTS

Our community rose to the challenge and helped each other in an inspiring way; at the same time, it highlighted people who were unsupported and isolated.

Council's support was greatly appreciated; particularly the proactive and responsive role of officers.

Those who were already struggling and the newly unemployed have increased anxiety about the future.

Marae mobilised quickly and naturally, servicing a very high number of the community.

The pandemic enhanced connections between some agencies and created new partnerships.

There are informal networks that operate in our community that mix professional, personal and family connections.

Contact with households highlighted the extent of poverty and hidden conditions such as overcrowding.

"Covid-19 has exposed the fragility of the existing Hutt Valley system for meeting food needs. A city-wide and preferably, a valley-wide response system is certainly needed for the future".

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

What could we do better in a similar scenario?

Hutt City Council:

- Immediate mobilisation of resource to meet anticipated and emerging needs in the interim before national, regional and local Emergency Operations Centre Welfare Arm structures are fully operational.
- Proactive and immediate establishment of communication and co-ordination with emergency food providers.
- Establish a database of what each agency offers.
- Communicate available support to the community through formal and informal channels
- Establish liaison roles especially for Māori and Pasifika communities.
- Identify Council facilities that could be used for food distribution including a centralised distribution hub.

Central Government:

- Resources distributed more evenly among local community organisations.
- Recognise and resource agencies and groups who are most connected to and trusted by those in need.

Emergency Food Providers:

- Communicate with each other through a network.
- Establish a streamlined process for people needing to access support.
- Establish a centralised database to ensure no double ups.
- Shift resources to where there is greatest need and those best to deliver.

What can we do to meet the current and ongoing needs of our community?

- Establish a network to keep communicating about ongoing need and meeting this need
- Discuss a 'best practice' approach to emergency food distribution.
- Discuss a geographic clusters model for food provision.
- Discuss the establishment of a geographic based database of people needing and accessing support.
- Grow the volunteer base across all age groups.

What can we do to address the underlying issue of food insecurity?

- Develop a plan that mobilises efforts to create a resilient and sustainable food system.