

Record of meeting of members of the Waimakariri Earthquake Support Service (WESS) on 7 August 2014, facilitated by Simon Markham (Waimakariri District Council, Manager: Policy and Customer Service, and formerly Manager: Earthquake Recovery)

The purpose of the meeting was to give those involved the opportunity to reflect on the service, before memories faded. Also allow others to appreciate what had happened in the Waimakariri District.

It was considered important to have a good record of what had happened, as many had no idea of what the group had been doing. The emphasis on the discussion was to be on roles, responsibilities, resources and reporting. See Appendix 1 for discussion guide

What made WESS successful? What views did the group hold in common, and were there any differences of opinion.

- It involved local people
- They had a shared base in the Kaiapoi Community Centre that allowed them to operate as a team
- They had different backgrounds and skill sets
- There was respect for the differences amongst the members of the group
- There was complete trust among the members of the group
- They felt that they were empowered and were doing something really worthwhile
- Having an office meant that there was interaction between them as they were coming and going, and the other members of the group provided each with a sounding board
- The respect the group received from the Council reinforced the significance of their role to the community
- They were independent of the main organizations working in recovery, and therefore without loyalties to particular organisations allowing them to be objective
- They were there to listen not to “tell”, in contrast to the other organizations which were “telling” people
- Their work involved face to face meetings in people’s homes, which took time but that did not matter.
- They were not in the “trap” of having to have qualifications and did not have to be social workers or mental health workers. They offered life skills and common sense.
- They had close contact with other organizations in the same space, and could get answers for people “on the spot”. It did not take days or weeks to arrange meetings to obtain the information needed.
- The weekly meetings enabled members of the group to talk about individual cases. There was an initial reluctance to use the database, which could be attributed to their backgrounds. The value of the database for them grew as they came to appreciate that they did not necessarily have good memories and the stored information provided the opportunity to refresh the understanding of a case.

2. What held WESS back?

There were rapid changes of information. No one appeared to know what was happening, specifically EQR and EQC.

The “knee jerk” reactions with respect to decisions about rebuilds and these are still coming through.

The changes in the building requirements

Lack of communications with home owners by EQC, which could be attributed in part to a failure to explain to the home owners at the time that assessments were done how long it would take for them to hear back. When dealing with EQC home owners faced a different situation than they would have if they had been organizing trades people to do work for them under different circumstances.

People sometimes did not understand the terminology being used, such as “*scope of works*” by EQC.

The Council and the Social Recovery Manager did the best they could to bring things together as the information changed which helped the members of the group to “translate” and “keep things calm”.

The group valued the way in which the Council kept them informed in advance of official releases of information, which allowed them to deal with their personal situations in advance. For example, a number of the members of the group had homes in the areas “red zoned”.

Any other issues?

They would not change the arrangements for the base or the composition of the group. Some additional technology might have been an advantage, such as a “hands free” phone for their cars.

The size of the case load might have been an issue on occasions.

The link with the Council was valuable for information.

How do you know that you were successful

Personal letters of thanks

Gifts

Meeting people wanting to tell you about how things were going for them or wanting to have you visit them.

The evaluation form, that was good because it did not have to be signed and did not identify the worker.

People contacting the service even if they did not need it immediately

Being a small part of a big collective including the Council and the victims and part of the progress being made as a community

The District being seen as survivors moving on, pointing to community activities such as the Kain Shield

The statistics, homes being dealt with tells the story

Doing ourselves out of a job and leading to a proactive community

The three legged stool – is anything missing?

Community development and social recovery

Community development represents the collective and the WESS the focus on the individual

The introduction of the community development initiatives represents the transition from victim to survivor

What about the situation from 2011 onwards?

Members of the WESS team were working from day one – 4 September in the Welfare Centre. This saw a flow through from emergency management, and they are now stepping on the community development.

Without pastoral care the service would not have worked

Leadership is missing from the three legged stool, maybe it should be seen as the top of the stool.

The balance of resources was about right, in contrast to the situation in Christchurch where pastoral care was missing.

The transition from Welfare to Recovery Assistance Centre was seen as a natural progression, its establishment was attributed to Sandra James, Jo Eelam and Chris Greengrass, who looked at what had been offered at the Welfare Centre and what needed to continue.

The establishment of WESS can be attributed in part to the information about the experiences coping with the bushfire emergency in Victoria, Australia. Also the experiences from major landslides in the Bay of Plenty influenced the establishment of WESS.

The Darnley Club was seen as providing the right context for WESS.

It was an established organization and had the ability to tap the right people on the shoulder. It was a small NGO and WESS was not going to be lost. There was no conflict of interest between the Darnley Club’s work in providing daycare for the elderly and WESS, and their funding came from different sources. Under other organizations there could have been conflicts of interest. The single umbrella organization was right for a community our size and it meant that there was no “big brother” looking over their shoulders.

WESS was well established by 22 February which was a huge advantage. They had had a meeting about the clusters that morning. [The Council was due to hold its first meeting with cluster groups on the evening of 22 February.]

The changes in the work of WESS

Initially the emphasis was on the red zone and EQC. Now the focus is on insurance issues.

Red zoning caused huge trauma

Each member of the group had about 40 households

The concept of 1 FTE was questioned – “how many hours in full-time?”

Initially they did not have as many households

They began with a list of the vulnerable as part of the handover from the RAC to WESS, with Jude and Chris leading. This included the elderly and Maori. Others were seconded to Waimakariri, including members who were working with Maori. It was seen as natural and good, and that they were part of the group but only paid by someone else. Other members of the group were shoulder tapped to provide the skills seen as needed.

1st phase could be seen as the hard core building, and it was about hurrying people to get organized for the rebuild. There was then a transition to looking after people.

The stages (1) coping, (2) resolved and (3) angry were being seen. Having this information help members of the group understand the reactions that they were encountering and allowed these to be treated as normal. They were also close to people’s experiences. Some had homes in the red zone others not, which made the circumstances real. These were brought home to the group as its meetings and brought about different approaches. For example, there was the experience of isolation as people moved away from their red zoned homes while others had no problems – some were up and some were down. “There was one of everything in the group”.

What were the values that under pinned the work of WESS?

It was one on one and face to face and involved trust

Community based and community focused

The preservation of dignity, people had lost their home which was their main asset

Listening

Not making a commitment that could not be met – being honest and real.

The link that provided information that people needed to know, irrespective of whether it was good or bad. It was better that this information was coming from an independent individual who was able to interpret “official speak”.

They heard about communication breakdown, time and time again.

Having built a relationship it is easier to give bad news

The one on one approach was questioned in terms of its efficiency. The bushfire information helped, but there were significant differences. There was no level playing field after an earthquake; the situation for every householder was different. In contrast, if a house has been burnt down it is the same. A group approach would not have worked with the diversity.

There were some common elements, for example the people who qualified for the government’s house and land package compared to those who qualified for the government’s land package and a payout from their insurance company, and then the group that had no insurance.

If there had been no red zoning it would have been even harder. The staged rebuild would have been a more difficult time for everyone. Even though the plan should have been approaching its final stages by now, it is unlikely that this would have been the case. Insurance factors might not have allowed the process to flow. More temporary accommodation would have been needed, and some people would not have had the money to rebuild.

WESS resources?

There was no magic answer to the number of households, because of the varying complexity of the cases. There cannot be a “right” figure; any figure that might come from the experiences of WESS would be just a guideline.

Someone might be seen only once in six months, and then only at a meeting or when seeking clarification. Also once people understood the role of WESS, they would approach the group when they needed something, so were not necessarily draining on WESS resources.

People did not leave the group because of the pressure of the work, but because they got other jobs or their contracts terminated. This provided opportunities to bring others into contact with the service. There were examples of “friends or friends” being put in touch with WESS everyday. Members of the group were also regarded as an “expert” when they were off duty, although people tended to respect that they need to “take time out”.

There were probably a couple of situations that were a drain on the group, but there were a lot of sad situations. A lot of people who had worked hard to own their home, such as people who had spent their lives working in the freezing works, and had homes in the Cass/Charles Street area. These people had had their assets “trashed”. The deaths of people who would be alive today but for the aftermath of the earthquakes were seen as distressing – the person who had gone out biking and dropped down dead. People without age on their side, and had no chance of rebuilding or would never own their own home again.

WESS compared with the services provided in Christchurch

The key difference was the ability to serve from and in their community

The size and scale of the work of WESS – advantages of a smaller area

That they were all under one agency, Darnley, and not lost within that organisation

Closing cases could be come an issue, but the group stressed when closing cases that help was only a phone call away. It was important to close cases, however, as this meant that the list became less daunting, and it did not mean that a case could not be reopened at a moment's notice. In some instances the time that cases were on the books had not been appreciated. They spent their time pushing for action for people but did not “push people on” as others were tending to do.

Under the housing team from CETAS there was a tendency for cases to be “closed off”.

The pastoral care team members sometimes pick up cases where something was needed but it was not necessarily passed on to WESS.

The relationship between the HUB and WESS was close, and there was generally a good relationship. The opportunities for members of the group to work in the HUB office was appreciated as it provided opportunities to understand Denise's role. She was almost part of WESS, but it was a different role with different links and there were advantages in having her organizing meetings. This allowed WESS to stay apart.

The great advantage of the HUB was that answers could be obtained to one-off questions. Having the service on the door step, accessible and at “your finger tips” was “priceless”

The relationship with the pastoral care team

They should not have been part of the same team. They listened to the same story over and over again. They offered a different approach. Cases are even now emerging of people who have been “under the radar”. E.g.: last week a 95 year old woman, very private and independent living alone in a damaged home with no running water in the bathroom who had been sent a cheque by EQC but had lost it was ‘discovered’. She has just had her first bath in three years. It was recognised that in situations like that faced by WESS someone will always get missed.

An example was given of Red Cross pre winter checks in Christchurch this year, which found people who had never seen anyone and people who had had no advice.

Despite communications letting people know where they can go, some people do not identify with the service. The pastoral team was involved at the right time for the people who did not identify that the service was for them. Agency messaging was not necessarily heard.

There were barriers with Fletchers EQR but these were not necessarily a problem, and had more to do with personalities. The group had to learn defuse the situation. The problem was that Fletchers employed very experienced builders who were used to dealing only with site managers and were not communicators. Eventually the members of WESS knew who to go to, and would definitely have missed the relationship at the HUB if it had not been there.

As far a settlement was concerned, success was getting the answers that allowed settlement. Some people are not back to where they came from, and in that respect settlement cannot be seen as a measure of success.

There was the issue of a good settlement v a quick settlement, and essentially it depends on the details of the settlement what is a “good settlement”. In some cases the people involved thought it was OK, but other things may come out later.

To a certain extent “acceptance” of the situation is necessary to maintain “sanity”. Some people have high mortgages and are unhappy; others have mortgages that they cannot afford. There were people who were devastated at leaving the home that they had lived in for a long while. One person made a table from her kitchen floorboards; others were urged to take things from the homes that they had to leave. The most difficult cases have moved from people with red zone homes to damaged homes in green zones and to those on TC3 land.

Other organizations.

Some uncertainty was encountered from CETAS and MSD as people from these organizations were not sure who they were dealing with. Difficulties at the start other than those involving the database could be traced to tension between government and non-government organizations and the fact that the people working for WESS were “not qualified”.

The group valued the fact that it was not run by the Council. They valued and respected the role of the Council, but would not have wanted to be run by the Council. The Social Recovery Manager’s role provided valuable links. By not being run by the Council, WESS avoided “management speak” and any emphasis on organization first. The roles of the two organizations were different and had complementary focus.

Job description and payment – OK?

“What was the job description?” When things changed the group changed the way it worked. They did what was needed.

WESS is funded to January 2015 and this is likely to continue until June 2015. MSD was seen as not handling the funding very well, and the uncertainty associated with short term funding caused stress for members of the group. For example, one year there was uncertainty running up to Christmas about whether members would still have a job after Christmas. Bits and pieces contracts create the impression that there is lack of value in the work being done. It would be valuable if funding was confirmed earlier, and this is something that needs to be communicated by the Council.

They are still getting new families. Recently three have just gone over the “cap”, and they are still getting complaints about Fletchers. All those over \$50,000 are still to be attended to and some of these are likely to go over the “cap” as well. Cases involving multi-units are still outstanding and these will be among the most difficult. The number of issues is increasing, and people psychological status is much worse. For example, a person is in a position to purchase another property but has hit a “brick wall”. Others talk about having bought a house not a home. Other complications such as illness or death of someone close are cutting in and this is making it more difficult for people to deal with earthquake related issues. Fletchers are now sending people to WESS to help to clarify the situation. The way the Council is using its earthquake relief fund is giving people the ‘leg up’ that they need, such as the bond money needed to move into village accommodation. This was contrasted with the way in which Christchurch is using its funding which is not helping individuals who need help. The group was thankful for the way in which the Council is running its Mayoral fund.

Satisfaction

The satisfaction from working for WESS comes from getting someone into a position where they can get on with their life. Being part of a team, for which Chris and Jude were providing the leadership and “cover”.

Working with the community for one of the biggest things to “hit” a community that has seen a number of setbacks such as the closure of freezing works.

Equipping people with the skills to help themselves and get on.

A special role

The ability to be useful at such a special historic time, and learning from the experience.

The little things – putting a household in a place where they are OK. They know they can rely on you. Getting people talking to each other when they had stopped doing this.

The special outings, such as taking two 90 + year olds to buy carpet, and on the way home buying fish ‘n chips for them

You cannot be too definitive, it is important to recognize differences early. That is what is needed and it will be needed for some time.

There was concern that MSD might take away Darnley as the umbrella.

Appendix: - Discussion Guide

Recap on Purpose of Session:

The last three or so years of WESS is a unique experience of a service that arose and adapted to extraordinary events. The Waimakariri District Council and others are keen to hear your reflections about the journey, as input to practice development for the future. All past and present WESS staff as well as close associates are invited to an evening of both celebrating the contribution you have made but also recording your thoughts and reflections through structured debriefing and discussion.

Notes taken – copy of written up notes provided back – no one quoted by name – discussion as long as it lasts – want to sense common conclusions and range of views – all contributions valid – not about individual or team ‘performance’ rather about how things came about, roles, responsibilities, resources, reporting and results

1. Three main things that made WESS successful
2. Three things that held WESS back
3. If you knew then what you know now, what would you have done differently in establishing, running or working in WESS
4. How do/did you know what was successful/what worked? What feedback did you get from service users?
5. The diagram suggests a model for operating social recovery/delivering social recovery services that I have termed the three legged stool – do you see it this way? Are there legs missing?
6. Think back to the establishment of the Recovery Assistance Centre on 20 September 2010 following closure of the Welfare Centre. How did that come about? How well did it work? On reflection were there things you would have done differently?
7. How and when did WESS get established? Was the Darnley Club context ‘right’ or should it have been another way?
8. On reflection was WESS established at the ‘right’ time?
9. How did WESS’s ‘way of working’ get sorted out? What have been the phases in WESS’s development over 3+ years?
10. What were/are the principles WESS was founded on?
11. To some extent the Bushfires approach provided precedent for the case management model through support coordination – did the learning from this help in a practical way in Kaiapoi or was it the mandate/recognition of the role that the bushfires experience contributed?
12. If there had been no Red Zoning and we had a complete rebuild as initially planned, what/how would WESS have been different?
13. How well was/is WESS resourced and what about the ratio of Households per Coordinator? Too many/few/about right?
14. What were/are the similarities and differences with ESS in town?
15. I recall the issue of ‘closing’ cases and the issues that this gave rise to. Did that get sorted the right way?

16. The Information Hub 'evolved' as WESS was getting up to speed. How do you see the relationship between the Hub and WESS – should they have been closer or more separate or was it about right?
17. As for 16. Above in relation to the Pastoral Care Team?
18. Similarly the Fletchers/EQR Hub got underway about that time. How do you see the relationship between the two?
19. The diagram shows the pace at which settlement occurred. How do you see the impact of WESS on settlement rate?
20. How acknowledging and responsive were the organisations WESS engaged with to assist households?
21. Any thoughts about the relationship between WESS and the Council through the role of the Social Recovery Manager? Could/should WESS have been run through the Council or was it better to be based in a community organisation?
22. Was/is the WESS coordinator job description right and were/are WESS staff appropriately remunerated for what is asked or you?
23. Where to now for WESS/its support coordination model? Is it still right or does it need tweaking?
24. For you personally what was the most satisfying thing about working for/being associated with WESS?
25. Anything else you would like to say about WESS and your recommendations for the future as and when such services might be required?