



Community Research

Executive Summary

The community and social service sector has played a pivotal role in supporting Hamilton city residents during a time of crisis and ongoing vulnerability and need. Through the responses of twenty local organisations, this report provides an insight into the activities and experiences of the community and social service sector over the last nine months. It highlights the concerns and the successes the sector has identified.

Fundamentally, the sector is grateful to the community funders group for its rapid response during the covid crisis, in terms of both the formation of the group, and the speed with which applications were processed. Similarly, the Hamilton City Council and the wider community came together in ways that facilitated the work of community and social service agencies. During the peak of the covid crisis, Hamilton's community and social agencies were well served financially and in terms of practical support and advice.

The sector also values the ongoing support from council and funders, and from the new opportunities (such as Here to Help U and new corporate relationships) that arose from the crisis. Also of note are the community networks that were established during lockdown, which enabled better information flows, higher levels of service and which provided the impetus to continue to operate and flourish beyond lockdown.

There are ongoing concerns, however, about responding to continuing needs, about meeting the demands of further lockdowns, about the future of funding for the sector, and about the wellbeing of both service users and staff. There is a pervasive disquiet that the generosity associated with covid has left future funding in jeopardy. Key community needs are food, housing, employment, and psychosocial health. These needs will continue irrespective of covid but will be exacerbated by further lockdowns.

Most community organisations are keenly aware of the need to invest in maintaining or improving their facilities, though funding for capital works is difficult to access, as is operational funding. Maintaining staff wellbeing is also problematic, with the strain of covid and its ramifications felt at all levels, while the capacity to provide sufficient leave or employ additional staff is limited.

Overall, the sector reports feeling well-connected and there is a sense of a common purpose, of new relationships and strengthened networks. The sector also acknowledges that by partnering effectively with other social service providers, local and central government and local funders, the achievements of the last nine months could be maintained and grown. Agencies also feel more resilient and agile in their ability to respond to further challenges as a result of covid-related improvements to their infrastructure and systems, though meeting higher levels of service delivery is a continuing concern.

We recommend responses and strategies that include the development of innovative funding models, streamlining official systems and processes, assistance with ensuring the wellbeing of staff and implementing systems of support for those whose needs have not yet been met.



Methodology

This research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted during September and October with twenty organisations from across the community and social service sector in Hamilton city. The Interviewees who were approached to participate in this research were located across the city, represent a wide range of organisation types and sizes and support a wide range of service users.

The Interviewees were asked 8 key questions as conversational starting points (see Appendix) and were encouraged to talk freely about their observations and experiences.

It quickly became evident that there were strong consistencies and commonalities across the sector. The data from the interviews were thematically organised and these themes shape the structure of the discussion below.

Findings

Funding

Conversations about funding were common across almost every organisation interviewed for this research. The primary concern held by those interviewed is that long-term funding will be affected. There are two rationales offered for this reasoning:

- ⤴ Significant funding was made available for meeting the needs of service users in crisis. While this was appropriate and vastly beneficial at the time, organisations are concerned it may have depleted any funds available over the longer term.
- ⤴ A global downturn may see funder investment portfolios decrease, further reducing the pool of funding available in future funding rounds.

One organisation summed this up well.

There are real and perceived concerns regarding ongoing funding. We are concerned we will suffer funding losses. We are worried about covid funding reducing funding for the rest of the year. We are worried that funding returns will be low. Funders may not have the same resources but so much of the sector relies on grants for general operational costs. We have experienced some pain, but we expect there is a lot more to come.

Most community and social service organisations have not been able to access government support such as wage subsidies, as funding of not-for-profit organisations is often received in advance and, while it often is tagged for specific purposes, it was not withdrawn when services were closed during lockdown. That is, there was no associated "loss of income". This means most organisations do not have the evidence to demonstrate a 30% or 40% drop in funding. None-the-less, many organisations interviewed have experienced an increase in workloads with additional pressure on services. They may have experienced a 30%-40% increase in demand (or in the case of food security during lockdown, as much as a seven-fold increase) on services but have not been able to access government support to meet those increases. The government criteria for much of the support does not align with how the non-profit sector operates. This has put additional pressure on the local philanthropic sector and may have consequences on sector funding in the future.

Funding that has been made available through Government is often tied to projects or specific services. It does not support the operational funding of community and social service organisations. Some groups have found that funding has been tied to specific crisis responses and is more difficult to access for general needs. This has been exacerbated by previous strategic changes in the funding priorities of several local funders.



Funding priorities have changed, and it has made funding harder more generally.

Stable funding that would allow the organisation to continue with core services, to make them secure for 3-4 years. Core business needs to be secure.

While some organisations have struggled to access government support, others, particularly those who already had contracts with government departments, have benefited from the additional resourcing. The system for accessing this additional funding was simplified and many local groups have been able to tap into covid-related funding.

The Funders Network was also identified by many as being an innovative and proactive solution to a very unusual global event. Organisations were grateful for a simple system, that was accessible, effective and very supportive of the extraordinary circumstances we were working in. They were supportive of how quickly this fund was established and how quickly they had a response to a request for funding.

The Waikato Funders coming together was really amazing. We were spending less time on funding applications but were still getting access to resources. We were able to put additional money into additional need. The turnaround was so quick. The timeframe is critical when people are in crisis.

The funders backing us 100%. It felt like a real community. A team.

The funders network worked really well for us. It made funding no longer the top of our worry list.

Interviewees were similarly positive about the role of Hamilton City Council, which responded both financially and in terms of leadership and facilitation.

By the time we got down to Level 1, I felt really proud of Hamilton's response to the crisis. I don't know of any other council that responded as generously and as thoughtfully as ours. I also appreciate their continuing support through the Community Development Team.

Facilities

The quality of facilities is a concern raised by many of the community and social service organisations interviewed. This is evident in both rented facilities (such as council or privately owned buildings), and in facilities owned by the community organisation.

Concerns about facilities ranged from a lack of space (a need to extend or find new affordable premises), to repairs and maintenance of buildings. Organisations identified a need to upgrade or refurbish facilities and a need for more space to meet the growth in demand. Organisations needed roofs repaired, kitchens updated, and carpets replaced. They talked about buildings looking aged and the concern about the long-term impact of not being able to get general maintenance work completed.

There are limited capital works being done on the premises. We need a new toilet block. That won't happen.

It is hard to look professional when the buildings around us are falling apart. But how do you get the money for that?



The State of the Community and Social Service Sector

People have reported a much greater connection between community and social service organisations. There has been a reported strengthening of relationships, communication and partnerships. Many related the need to sustain this change as it resulted in some excellent outcomes for those accessing social services.

The ethnic sector became much better-connected during lockdown and the relationships have continued. The meetings have continued as well but are not as frequent.

There is a mindset change and we are working together much better. I think this means we are able to engage better wrap around services because we are connected and can work better together to meet those needs.

We were always pretty collaborative, and we had good relationships. That became really beneficial during covid. We knew who the leaders were and who to have conversations with. We are strengthened post covid as these relationships got even better.

The sector showed exceptional resilience and agility. They were able to meet the growing needs of the community, they provided new services as required and found new ways to deliver their standard services. As New Zealand went into lockdown in late March, Hamilton city responded quickly and collaboratively on multiple fronts. This is perhaps best exemplified by the *Food Hub* that developed at Claudelands, which incorporated the efforts of the community sector, local and national government, the business sector, transport and logistics, the voluntary sector and the hospitality sector. Together, their efforts fed up to 900 people per day during lockdown; individually, little would have been achieved.

As lockdown continued, the systems, processes and policies that were developed assisted community organisations to manage unprecedented increases in demand. The Here to Help U site was particularly useful for those providing food.

We were never food distributors, but provided 109 parcels over 2-3 months. Over 90 blankets. Now it is care packages.'

'We have built relationships with corporate groups who have helped with parcel preparation to prepare higher volumes in a short space of time.

Several groups also identified an ongoing shift in the demand for services. It has put pressure on staff, resourcing, planning and facilities.

[Our Sector] now has a disability and now we have to learn how to manage this disability. We are limping along so we are not back to physically normal – this might be our new normal – which means we need additional support to make this work.

Alongside the crisis work, several organisations are in the process of making physical changes in or to their workspaces. They identified some areas of concern or frustration. This often related to dealings with central and local government processes.

The resource consent process is difficult, expensive, long and arduous... I feel like I am supposed to know the process. The council works in silos. All we want to do is provide additional support to the community.



Council processes create complications and barriers where partnerships could enable things to work really well. Council people are awesome but the processes create the barriers.

Many in the community and social service sector have historically generated additional revenue through room hire and fundraising events. The opportunities have been limited in recent months and is likely to be limited in the future because of the possibility of continuing covid restrictions. This is a source of concern for the sector.

Vulnerable People

Community organisations reported a change in older people accessing services. They reported that it has taken a long time for these residents to access services again. The number of older persons accessing social service support and activities has not returned to pre-covid numbers. This was experienced across community houses, age-care agencies, ethnic services and services providing psychosocial support.

Migrant and refugee families have been particularly impacted by the events of the last few months. They are still disproportionately affected now, and community organisations have been diligent in meeting a growth in need in this space.

The migrant population is especially impacted by job losses; they are more isolated from family, from big events like weddings and funerals. They aren't able to get home. For migrant students, many of them are paying huge money to be here but they can't get work here now. They are feeling lost. Stressed. Despondent.

The migrant community have slipped through a number of gaps that have made them more vulnerable than other groups. Those without citizenship or permanent residency have been unable to access support through government departments and have relied on the community and social service sector. Anecdotally, it is not just the system that has meant non-resident migrants have not accessed support. It is also a fear held by some migrants that they may be deported if the government finds out they need assistance. This has resulted in an increased pressure on the resources and systems of the sector.

A number of organisations talked about the increase in social issues in local communities in the months since lockdown. In particular, there has been an increase in people 'begging' in the suburbs, people have been sleeping in community carparks and addiction issues are more visible in communities. One interviewee reported that

we found a woman drinking the drips of petrol from pumps at the local service station. We haven't seen anything like that before.

The concern is that the vulnerable have reached a new level of desperation and need precisely when services and staff are stretched further than ever before.

Staff and Volunteers

Almost every organisation interviewed cited the increased pressure on staff impacting staff wellbeing. Organisations talked about significant increases in community need with no corresponding support for extending staff hours or hiring additional staff. Staff in the sector are anxious about taking a break or shutting down services because of the impact that will have on those in need, but there is genuine concern for staff wellbeing and organisations recognise that it is imperative that staff and volunteers get a break.



Keeping our head above water. This has highlighted a need for human resources, but we need more space and more resources to accommodate that. We are at capacity.

... do you put money into that, or into staff hours? Staff end up working for free.

Emotionally the team have not recovered. A good portion of staff are using EAP.

Everyone is feeling really drained. The team need a break. But what will happen to our community when we go into Christmas?

The result is an underlying fatigue amongst staff, volunteers and service users that predisposes them to minor illnesses, emotional fragility, impatience and despondence. In the public arena, these effects are laid firmly at the covid door and recognised as connected to the unrelenting uncertainty of the times. Most organisations, however, do not have the resources to accommodate the levels of leave that can be necessary to ensure wellbeing. There is also an acknowledgement however, that mutual support – or kindness – within and between organisations, is an integral element of maintaining wellbeing.

Community Needs

Right across the diverse groups interviewed there was a reported increase in demand and theme of new people accessing services. Key areas of need have been in

- ⤴ Food
- ⤴ Accommodation
- ⤴ Employment
- ⤴ Psychosocial needs

Food security (or lack of it) is particularly evident and even organisations who do not traditionally work in that space, have seen a growing desperation for food support.

[We have experienced] a 150% increase in foodbank requests. That doesn't include our free store and requests for casual support.

It feels more critical. Around 30-40 people came in today before the weekend. About 50 extra will pop in and pick up what is left over.

Accommodation is an obvious issue that is being addressed at multiple levels. Many organisations have talked about the level of communication and collaboration across the housing space. The local Housing Initiative had already created a space for information sharing and growing relationships across the space. This has grown further in recent months and the community and social service sector is an active participant in network.

The housing sector, there are barriers being broken down between housing group companies and the community sector. The private sector relationships are strengthened by us sitting on some groups and building relationships.

But broader issues related to housing remain. Interviewees talked about the difficulty of people accessing long-term appropriate housing solutions. Families staying in motels and other emergency housing environments have reported feeling unsafe, and there are challenges finding longer-term solutions for families.

We have a bottleneck in housing because people can't get out of emergency housing into transitional housing. These days we see one or two families go into Kianga Ora houses. They all have the



assessments and meet the criteria but can't get in. Being somewhat 'safe' means they get pushed down the waiting list.

Motels are not always safe environments for families.

Tenancy is a big issue because the issue is changing. Property managers are refusing to do repairs. People often don't know their rights.

The implications of the housing shortage are evident in the observations of other community organisations. Homeless Hamilton residents are still sleeping under bridges and several organisations reported finding people sleeping in their carparks. This was a trend repeated right around Hamilton city.

Got a guy sleeping in our carpark, one regular and another one on occasions. I think they feel safer there because there are lights on.

We have four people living in our car park.

The housing shortage in Hamilton city is well documented and there are activities happening across the government, private and community sectors to resolve the issues, but the immediate impact of the shortage continues to be evident under local bridges and in community car parks.

Unemployment rates have increased markedly in the last 9 months and many community organizations are working to support those who have found themselves recently unemployed, or underemployed.

We are seeing a lot of employment issues. Wage subsidies helped, but we see weird ones who don't fit the criteria. We are seeing employers tying up contracts to safeguard risks but it is impacting employees.

One household of six people were 'let go' during covid. They had no money for rent or food. They were really struggling.

The students are the most vulnerable. They are stressed, they are not eating, they have lost their jobs.

Community and social service organisations are providing CV services; they are connecting newly vulnerable people to support and budgeting services and they are connecting people to the counselling services that are available to provide affordable and accessible assistance.

The impact on the psychological wellbeing of people over the last nine months is increasingly evident and a number of community organisations reflected on what they have seen.

[we are seeing] different problems. Depression. Younger people with depression. The youngest was seven. We are seeing suicidal ideation and attempts in our youth population.

People are in a crisis state... We see the red flags. Culturally it can be hard to admit there is a problem.

Normally we would see 10-15 a month. We saw an additional 82 people in a 3-month period on top of our usual 10-15 per month.

... where someone just wants to talk. This has increased a lot.



Many of the counselling services are feeling stretched. They have reported their staff are tired and in need of a break, the services need to employ more qualified counsellors to keep up with demand and the services need additional resourcing to remunerate their team adequately.

The Future

When asked about what the future looks like, the interviewees expressed a mix of confidence and concern. Many of our community and social service organisations had been able to secure essential service status through the covid crisis. They have developed policies that enable their organisations to operate remotely and have the systems and infrastructure in place to facilitate this. Many organisations have maintained a mix of allowing staff to work from both the office and home. They are feeling resilient in terms of their broad infrastructure should a second wave of covid hit Hamilton city.

Organisations that reported they are doing well financially and are feeling optimistic about their future were generally those with operational reserves and diverse revenue streams. Smaller and newer organisations generally lacked the security of operational reserves and had no plan to be able to build those reserves.

A number of organisations expressed concern about maintaining higher levels of service delivery with the current resourcing levels. They were concerned about staff taking the break they needed without it adversely impacting the communities they served.

Several organisations were also concerned that funding would be diverted from the broad base of the sector and targeted towards those who were demonstrating a more immediate link to a covid response. There were also concerns that some funders would divert their grants from general operational expenses to more project-based funding.

Another concern raised by the sector was that with a growth in new vulnerability and an increase in service provision, there is a risk of growing dependence. This was a sentiment expressed by several community organisations.

How do we move communities from being dependant to independent while still having access to the services they need?

No doubt, the sector will keep a watching brief on the possibilities in this space.

Conclusion

The systems to access funding, both through government and local funders has improved. The systems and processes employed through covid (and continuing in many instances) has been based on a high trust model, allowing organisations to access resourcing without onerous and time-consuming applications and accountabilities.

Most organisations identified the growth in the relationships across the sector as a positive and enduring by-product of the covid crisis. New partnerships have grown, there is greater information sharing across organisations and we have seen an increased appetite for collaborations. Three key factors have influenced this change.

- ⤴ The sector has been communicating more regularly with others and many organisations have made new connections with those not normally in their sphere. Zoom was a very effective platform for communication and was well used through lockdown; much of this communication has continued.



- ⤴ The availability of funding for covid-related mahi meant that organisations were able to collaborate on solutions for meeting community needs, rather than competing for the limited resources available. This has an immediate impact, opening the door to conversations of partnership and co-operation.
- ⤴ It is easier for organisations to partner to meet very a specific identified need. A community crisis makes that need very clear and evident. Also, meeting that need during a time of crisis is often more measurable. These factors affect the capacity to and relevance of partnering across organisations. The issues our community organisations work to address are, in usual times, more diverse, complicated, and long-term. To create the right conditions and systems to collaborate effectively takes significant time and resourcing. Organisations are often stretched on both.

Recommendations

Organisations are considering how to work together better, how to maintain the wins from the covid-19 crisis, and how to innovate for better community solutions. To achieve this we suggest that:

1. Our funders consider how to support some innovative solutions – such as funding across initiatives rather than funding being connected to a single entity (a participatory funding model).
2. Our entities negotiate to identify a fund holder who then resources the group of entities connected to an initiative with a shared community outcome. There is community appetite to work together and to innovate for greater impact.
3. Collaboration with funders, business and local council to maximise the potential for collective impact.
4. Local government works to streamline its processes and co-ordinate its practices.
5. More multiyear funding agreements to facilitate greater organisational security and create an environment more conducive to financial and strategic planning.
6. Improved financial security to create a better environment for cross-sector projects and collaborations.
7. Support to build operational reserves to build resilience across the not-for-profit sector, especially for small or new grassroots groups whose income streams have been compromised in the last nine months.
8. Dedicated funding for special leave for covid-related illness or self-isolation to supplement sick leave allocations.
9. Development of supportive systems to catch those – mostly non-citizens – who fall through the cracks.
10. A percentage of all grants is automatically assigned to operational and/or capital expenses.
11. Continued monitoring of need (mental health, addiction, housing, employment, food security etc) in the community to encourage proactive, rather than reactive, strategies

Appendix

Questions

- ⤴ What are the key issues you are seeing?
- ⤴ What is working really well for the sector
- ⤴ What could be working better? Any thoughts on what would help with that?
- ⤴ What changes have you observed? Demand/services/clientele
- ⤴ Do you have any specific concerns?
- ⤴ What do you need help with?



- ⚡ What does the future look like for you? What if we go back into lockdowns? How prepared are you? Will you continue to operate? What would you need to operate well?
- ⚡ Any success stories or challenge stories?

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