Earthquake Support Coordination Service

In the aftermath of disaster, social recovery is key. Thousands of individuals and families have been directly affected by the ongoing seismic activity in the Canterbury region. Some have had to leave their homes permanently, others have had to find temporary accommodation while their homes are repaired or rebuilt.

Many people need help dealing with EQC, understanding insurance issues, or organising repairs. Some might need financial assistance and information, or referrals to various counselling and support agencies. There was a compelling need to develop a coordinated support service to facilitate recovery and strengthen community resilience.

Innovative response The Earthquake Support Coordination Service (ESCS) draws on the skills of both government and non-governmental (NGO) community-based social agencies, and is predicated on a model of one service across multiple providers. It is based on a collaborative approach, with all agencies working together for the greater good.

The service is delivered by a team of Earthquake Support Coordinators (ESCs) who – although employed, managed by and based in their respective agencies – come together weekly for information updates and training. ESCs can help clients navigate the earthquake information pathway, work out what needs to be done and create a recovery plan, provide information or access to other services, facilitate meetings and offer support.

A single customer relationship management database, operated by the Canterbury Earthquake Temporary Accommodation Service (CETAS), captures all client and service information and is accessible across all participating agencies. This shared database allows a more targeted and productive – and therefore more cost effective – means of service delivery.

Who Experienced practitioners in the social services field deliver the ESCS. Government agencies include the Ministry of Social Development (MSD), Inland Revenue (IR), Te Puni Kokiri (TPK) and CETAS. NGO providers include Te Runanga o Nga Maata Waka, Methodist Mission, Presbyterian Support, Aranui Community Trust, He Oranga Pounamu, Age Concern and Richmond NZ, among others.

Bringing together government and community sectors, including larger and smaller providers, has created a degree of flexibility, responsiveness and adaptability in the ESCS mix. It has allowed the ESCS to draw on the specific skills base of experienced workers in different areas (for example, mental health, refugee or immigrant communities, Pasifika groups), transcended former boundaries and resulted in greater understanding between the agencies involved.

The ESCS management group, comprising representatives from key agencies, provides operational oversight. It monitors demand, provides governance and leadership, manages stakeholders and fosters a learning and innovation culture, supporting service development.

Christchurch Innovations In Christchurch, necessity has driven innovation in how government agencies deliver client services.

The Canterbury earthquakes in September 2010 and February 2011 and ongoing seismic activity have changed the face of Christchurch forever and had a huge impact on its citizens and economy. However, in adversity there’s also optimism and opportunity. We can learn from Christchurch.

This case study is one of a series prepared by the State Services Commission to demonstrate how innovative thinking and practice has driven the response of government and non-government agencies alike, as they work together to rebuild Canterbury and provide services for the community.

The Christchurch innovations can serve as a model for Better Public Services across New Zealand.

For information on other Christchurch innovations go to: www.ssc.govt.nz/christchurch-innovations
How it works

The ESCS offers free support and advice to individuals and families adversely affected by the earthquakes. It has been widely promoted – in brochures and by printed ‘calling’ cards (used in door-to-door campaigns), through websites (including MSD, CERA and CETAS), and at community meetings. People can access the service by calling its 0800 number, visiting the Earthquake Assistance Centre in Avondale, the earthquake hub in Kaiapoi, CETAS offices in Papanui and Riccarton, or through other government agencies or community organisations. There are multiple ways in and no wrong door.

When a client makes contact with the service, their needs are triaged and they are assigned an ESC who will work with them to develop an action plan. It’s a flexible system, ranging from ‘light touch’ support where it’s needed, to intensive ‘wrap around’ support for people who require a greater degree of intervention and assistance.

All ESCs participate in weekly training meetings, designed to ensure they keep abreast of quake-related issues and information. “It’s a brilliant resource,” says Te Runanga o Nga Maata Waka Manager Linda Ngata. “We have a group of people now who are absolute experts in manoeuvring a way through EQC claims, understanding the process, understanding insurance, but who also have a bigger understanding of tech reports and what’s happening across Christchurch in terms of the land.”

The focus is on empowering the client. According to Penny Taylor, Regional Manager for Presbyterian Support, an ESCS client is “talking to someone who is interested in them, understands their particular situation and all the nuances around that. Coordinators come with a huge amount of knowledge about the rebuild, insurance, housing and how to help people navigate through the system.”

Making it happen

Immediately after the September 2010 quake, both government and community agencies worked tirelessly to connect with people in need. The swift response of Canterbury’s Welfare Advisory Group (WAG), which coordinates the region’s welfare response efforts in a civil defence emergency, was an immediate example of support in action and laid the foundation for the ESCS.

The Ministry of Social Development’s Family and Community Services (FACS) played a pivotal role in leading the development of the ESCS. According to former South Island Manager FACS, Denise Kidd (now Manager, Community Resilience, CERA), research into the experience of communities affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires in Australia suggests that having survived disaster, people often need ongoing support.

Kidd describes the ESCS as public service in its purest sense, “It’s about public money and public funding processes, delivered in a partnership between the public service and NGO sector.” By working with a range of community organisations, the ESCS benefited from the specialist skills, reputation and existing capacity of those agencies. As Taylor says, FACS was able “to call on all its resources to respond to the welfare needs of the community.”

With thousands of homes damaged and many residents displaced, it soon became clear there was pressing need for accommodation assistance. CETAS was created to meet this need. Staffed by personnel seconded from the former DBH, IR and MSD, CETAS manages a range of accommodation options – including the purpose built temporary villages in Kaiapoi, Linwood Park and Rawhiti Domain – as well as providing financial assistance, managing the shared database, and facilitating the weekly information and training sessions for service workers.

A handbook developed by MSD gives ESCs a framework for their practice. “It’s absolutely brilliant,” says Ngata, “There’s a really good skill base of experienced workers in different areas ... the handbook gives everyone a base to springboard from and to guide them.” Frequent training and information updates have been critical to the service’s success – ensuring the ESCs add value to the households they work with. “It’s quite a big investment in terms of keeping them upskilled, but it’s been extraordinarily useful,” says Kidd.

Results

The ESCS has interacted with thousands of clients since its inception. By mid-2012 well over 7,500 households were registered in the CETAS database and over 4,500 of these had had contact with an ESC. Feedback from EQC, CERA, Fletcher Construction and insurance companies acknowledge the value of and need for the ESCS.
Client Stories

Home away from home
When Lynda Stevens was told her family had to move out while their home was repaired, she considered the available options and eventually found their home away from home at the Linwood Park Village, operated by CETAS. “The site is well managed, the units clean, warm and comfortable,” says Lynda. “This has been marvellous for us … the Government has done wonders in building these homes.”

On registering at the village, Lynda was automatically referred to the ESCS and ESC John Coyle from the Methodist Mission was assigned to work with the family. While Lynda was aware the service was available, she never imagined she might be eligible to use it. In fact, at first she wondered “how the heck he’d be any help.”

The experience proved positive. A projected three-week stay in temporary accommodation stretched to well over two months, and the impact of the quakes and disruption to their lives took its toll. “You think you’re okay,” says Lynda, “and then the emotions catch up.”

John has accompanied Lynda to meetings with contractors, helped negotiate extensions to their lease … “any problems I’ve had at all, whenever I’ve needed any support or help in sorting anything, he’s been there,” says Lynda. “Working with John has been wonderful. I recommend coordinators, highly recommend them.”

Support when you need it
Like thousands of other Christchurch residents, Grace and Mike Turner are still dealing with the aftermath of the quakes. Their house is severely damaged, their lives on hold.

They vividly remember immediate effects – geysers of liquefaction, mess everywhere, no power, water or sewerage, chimneys collapsing, the hot water cylinder exploding – and their fear as they set off to find their children. They choked on the dust of collapsed buildings and witnessed the tide of people flooding out of the central city.

The Maori Wardens who went door-to-door in the days after the quake gave the Turners’ contact details to Te Runanga O Nga Maata Waka, and ESC Josette Gillette-Impey got in touch. “We lost people in the CTV building and on the day she rang we were going to a funeral,” recalls Grace. They had no time to talk, but did file her number.

Initially, Grace and Mike managed by themselves. But then, “I remember one day feeling so overwhelmed. We just needed support,” says Grace. They rang Josette and “she was here within half an hour. It was remarkable - I was getting nowhere - so for her to come and help out was a huge relief.”

From dealing with EQC and insurance claims, arranging legal advice, “translating jargon”, organising replacement heating and emergency demolition and repairs, “making endless phone calls on our behalf”, and offering emotional as well as material support, Josette has helped them navigate through the system, cope with the reality of disaster and start the process of recovery.

Grace and Mike really appreciate the assistance they’ve received from the ESCS. “The stresses were just too big for us to handle by ourselves… Josette’s always positive, always giving us good advice. She’s one in a million!”
Critical success factors

- The ESCS has been characterised by strong, strategic leadership, built on a culture of cooperation and respect. Government and NGO leaders had a clear vision of what they were trying to achieve and have consistently kept that vision in focus.
- The ESCS is a true partnership between government and NGO sectors. It draws on and extends existing capability and encourages communities to fully engage in the process of recovery.
- Government funding of training for ESCs was critical to the service’s success.
- The model of one service across multiple providers, with access to a common database, facilitates information sharing and enables more successful, cost effective delivery of support.
- ESCS service delivery revolves around client needs and can be accessed through multiple doors. Clients don’t have to tell their story to different agencies.

Looking forward. While not discounting the possible impact of more big quakes, CETAS Manager David Griffiths believes demand for temporary accommodation should taper off as the recovery progresses. However, he also believes the need for dedicated earthquake support services will continue for some time. “The needs within the service are changing. We’ve gone through the initial stage – the emergency response – and we’re now dealing with insurance, waiting, psychological issues, and living with ongoing uncertainty. For a lot of people the process hasn’t even started yet.”

Government and NGOs alike are now considering how the ESCS can transition to meet future needs, when support services move from crisis, through recovery to a more business as usual approach. The quake experience has prompted a profound shift in ideas on how to deliver social services. Looking forward, it has potential to become more flexible, responsive, adaptable, and collaborative – to foster resilience and empower individuals and communities to lead their own recovery and take greater responsibility for their own health and wellbeing.

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