



# WEST AUCKLAND RECOVERY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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A report for the Recovery Office

August 2024



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## Acknowledgements

Our grateful thanks are extended to the community stakeholders and Storm Recovery Navigators who took part in the needs assessment and shared their time, knowledge, and experience. The openness and warmth with which all participated is appreciated.

Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou.

The project was commissioned and funded by Auckland Council.

## Executive Summary

Two severe weather events in Tāmaki Makaurau in early 2023 caused widespread damage and displaced thousands of Aucklanders, with many facing ongoing needs stemming from one or both events. The Auckland Council-led Tāmaki Makaurau Recovery Office ('the Recovery Office') has undertaken a series of needs assessments to support the development of local recovery plans; this document presents findings from the West Auckland assessment. It draws on feedback from community organisations and the Recovery Office's Storm Recovery Navigators ('Navigators').

Community organisations provided a wide range of services and supports in the initial response to the flooding. Since then, a spectrum of needs has remained, while others have emerged over time. In many instances, existing needs were exacerbated by the weather events, and it can be hard to ascertain the extent to which these are still linked, or not. Key recovery needs identified centred on:

- **Housing and accommodation** needs that stem from residents being relocated to other Auckland suburbs, a lack of appropriate housing in West Auckland, and flood-damaged homes. This has resulted in overcrowding, unsanitary and possibly harmful living conditions, increased financial costs, a loss of familial ties and cultural connections, and negative psychological impacts.
- **Mental health and wellbeing** needs linked to the trauma of the events, anxiety about future adverse weather events, stress and fatigue, displacement, financial stress and uncertainty, relationship tensions, and unsuitable accommodation arrangements.
- **Information and support** to address ongoing and emerging recovery-related needs. The categorisation process is a key area where information and support are required.
- **Financial** needs due to the prolonged recovery period, related to insurance issues, people having to pay rent while maintaining a mortgage, homes requiring repairs, and the replacement of material items. The 'cost of living' crisis adds another layer to these needs.
- **Infrastructure issues** linked to stormwater or drainage systems, a need to protect the health and flow of streams, and damage to roading.
- **Environmental impact and community disconnection**, due to deserted streets or homes, rubbish dumping on empty properties, neighbours not returning, local amenities and parks still in a state of disrepair and the loss of spaces for recreation and gathering.
- **Toll on community organisations and their workers**, in terms of needing to bring business as usual back on track, fatigue, and risk of burnout.
- **Preparedness for the next event** at individual/whānau level, as well as organisational, community and council levels.

Eighteen months on, community organisations and Navigators are still playing a range of roles in meeting recovery needs, including: **connecting residents** to service and support options and **advocating** on their behalf; providing **material resources** to families still struggling to recover; providing **counselling and emotional support**; **outreach activities** to help unearth lingering or new recovery needs; **climate resilience** activities; and **preparing residents** for future adverse weather events. Since the navigation service came into place in September 2023, much of this support is now provided by this team, which has taken some pressure off community organisations.

Aspects of the ongoing recovery work that are working well within the West Auckland community include **strong relationships** and a **coordinated approach** between community organisations, using **effective systems** for collaboration and information sharing. **Outreach activities** help bring people into the services, and having **Partner Navigators** based in the community has added another level of expertise to the community offering and a link into council. Navigators noted great team cohesion and support, strong relationships with whānau, and having the right people in the roles as key factors for success.

A range of challenges were also identified in undertaking recovery work, including: **difficulties engaging the local community** (e.g., due to language barriers, lack of awareness of services); the **time it takes to build trust**; **funding coming to an end**; use of **technical language** within systems and processes (e.g., categorisation); people **losing their patience**, and taking their frustration out on those who are trying to support them; and **insufficient resourcing** to address mental health needs. **Changes within council** (e.g., restructuring within Auckland Emergency Management) and everyone **'learning on the go'** were also noted as challenges.

Longer-term concerns regarding local area risks include a lack of coordinated community (council included) preparedness for adverse weather events, the capacity of infrastructure to withstand future events, the potential negative impact of housing redevelopments and intensification, and threats to the natural environment. In sustaining recovery within West Auckland, community stakeholders identified a need for Auckland Council re-engagement, more responsive and connected systems and resourcing for much needed services (e.g., mental health), and re-building resilience within community organisations.

# 1. Introduction

Tāmaki Makaurau experienced two severe weather events in early 2023 – flooding on January 27 and Cyclone Gabrielle in mid-February – that caused widespread damage and displaced thousands of Aucklanders. Residents were severely impacted in the immediate aftermath, with many still facing challenges resulting in ongoing needs stemming from one or both of these events.

The Auckland Council-led Tāmaki Makaurau Recovery Office was established in April 2023 to coordinate recovery efforts on behalf of central and local government and their partners. Its role includes a social and wellbeing workstream, which is responsible for responding to the social needs of residents who continue to be impacted by the flooding and/or cyclone. Community needs assessments were undertaken in three geographic areas<sup>1</sup> – West Auckland, Mt Roskill/Wesley, and Māngere/Favona – to support the development of local recovery plans. More specifically, the purpose of these was to identify:

- Community-level impacts and the scale and nature of unmet needs as a result of the events
- The recovery needs that community organisations are meeting, and the role that they are playing in this
- The nature of support sought by community organisations in carrying out this work, including the role of the Auckland Recovery Office in meeting recovery needs.

This document presents findings from the West Auckland<sup>2</sup> needs assessment, which took place in May-June 2024, approximately 18 months after the initial weather events.

## Research approach

Data collection for this needs assessment involved three focus groups with West Auckland community stakeholders who work closely with affected communities, facilitated by a Dovetail researcher. A total of 16 stakeholders participated in discussions. Two focus groups included representatives of a range of community organisations based in or working within West Auckland (n=4 x 2). The third group consisted of West Auckland-specific Storm Recovery Navigators, including Partner Navigators who are based within community organisations (n=8). Storm Recovery Navigators help individuals and whānau access the information, services and support needed to plan their recovery from severe weather disasters.

The Recovery Office identified participating community organisations, which were invited to participate by Community Waitākere. Navigators were invited through their managers at either the Recovery Office or relevant community organisations. The discussions were conducted online and

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<sup>1</sup> These three areas were selected due to: high levels of socioeconomic deprivation; the high level of impact and disruption as a consequence of the weather events; the likelihood of being impacted by future weather events; and the high number of individuals who registered for temporary accommodation and the Ministry of Social Development Civil Defence payment following the events.

<sup>2</sup> Findings from the needs assessments conducted in Mt Roskill/Wesley and Māngere/Favona are reported separately.

lasted around two hours. All sessions were recorded with permission from focus group participants and transcribed by a professional transcriber.

A thematic analysis of the data was conducted to identify and map out key themes from the interviews. To acknowledge their time and contribution to the research, participating community organisations were provided with koha of a \$100 Warehouse voucher.

## This report

This document presents findings relating to current needs and work in West Auckland as a result of the 2023 weather events. Other research has been conducted on the emergency response and more immediate recovery.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that reporting does not encompass all community-led recovery work, as not all groups or organisations involved participated in the research.

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., see: <https://www.communitywaitakere.org.nz/west-auckland-emergency-response-report>

## 2. Impact of early 2023 extreme weather events on West Auckland residents

Similar to other areas in Tāmaki Makaurau, residents in West Auckland were severely impacted by the Auckland Anniversary January catastrophic floods from January 27<sup>th</sup> when the city received 160mm rainfall in six hours. This deep flooding largely resulted from the region's network of streams and stormwater systems were overwhelmed. For example, water levels in Paremuka and Momutu streams both reached approximately 3m on the evening of January 27, 2.5-2.9m higher than their levels the previous day. As the streams burst their banks, floodwaters overwhelmed residential streets, such as Henderson's Clover Drive and Ranui's Camphora Place, where most homes sustained significant damage.

As a result, families were forced to leave unsafe and flooded properties, often under frightening conditions. There were also widespread reports of cars and household goods destroyed due to water damage. Many residents were subsequently left homeless and living in temporary accommodation, struggling to feed their family, and children were unable to attend school.

Approximately two weeks following the Auckland Anniversary rainstorm, Cyclone Gabrielle began impacting Auckland on February 12, 2023. The cyclone brought significant rainfall and strong winds to the region, causing subsequent widespread damage and disruption, including catastrophic landslides and significant infrastructure damage, particularly to West Auckland's coastal communities.

According to other research,<sup>3</sup> the West Auckland's response to the extreme weather was swift, effective, and well-coordinated, utilising existing networks and trusted connections. However, communication from official channels was often unclear and contradictory, and support from official organisations was at times uncoordinated. Official agencies were perceived as siloed and inflexible.



### 3. Recovery needs in West Auckland

Community stakeholders reported a range of ongoing needs within the West Auckland community related to the weather events. These include unresolved issues from the immediate aftermath, as well as new challenges that have developed since this time.

Although stakeholders described unique circumstances, they identified common key needs within the community. They spoke of the interrelatedness between storm-related needs and pre-existing needs, needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 'cost of living' crisis, which at times make it hard to identify exactly where the needs have come from.

Some needs remain hidden because some people still do not know they can access help or are reluctant to accept it. This was attributed to distrust from parts of the community towards authorities, and/or some people feeling whakamā (embarrassed or ashamed) and concerned about the implications of accepting help (e.g., may cause issues with landlord and jeopardise their tenancy). In many cases, stakeholders identified unmet needs in the community when undertaking outreach work. They said they are often surprised to see unaddressed damage to housing and the conditions that people still live under, 17 months on. Some people were unaware that damage to their homes was a consequence of the weather events, because impacts have emerged over time.

*There's a couple of families that I can think of where I've managed to bring those walls down and go to their homes and was just like oh my God, you guys have got a hole in your ceiling in the living room, what the heck. What's that from? Like are you alright? And they're just like, "it was the floods, it was a leak, when I get enough money I'll do it." I was like, why haven't you called someone, you have the Navigators around, and she's like "I don't want them coming through my house, that's whakamā." (Community stakeholder)*

It was reported that some of the identified needs and ongoing impacts, particularly around housing and financial needs, were evident in the community prior to the flooding, but were exacerbated by the weather events. Subsequently, those already vulnerable were, and are still, particularly impacted. This includes minorities and marginalised communities – particularly Māori, Pacific and elderly. Children and youth were also seen to be feeling the continued impact of the events.

#### Overview of key recovery needs

This section presents an overview of the identified needs in West Auckland that remain following the two weather events.

##### Housing and accommodation

Feedback indicates that 17 months on, housing and accommodation remains a key challenge for people of West Auckland, both for homeowners and tenants. These needs have been exacerbated by the lack of housing stock. We heard that many people are still displaced, and live in temporary or emergency accommodation, such as motels or with family or friends. Some had to relocate to other Auckland suburbs after the weather events and remain there today. Others have been required to frequently move around for accommodation. People in temporary or emergency accommodation face issues such as:

- **Overcrowding** due to families living in accommodation not designed to meet the number of occupants.
- **Living without appropriate amenities for a 'normal' life.** For example, many motels lack proper kitchen facilities, leaving families unable to cook meals.
- **Inability to commute to school and/or work** due to living further away. For some families, this has resulted in having to give up work, or children not going to school because it is too difficult or the family do not have the means to get there. We were told of one mother who had lost her job because the time it took her to get the children to school every morning meant she was always late.
- **Ongoing disruption for children and youth**, who have moved away from their friends and who may have had to change schools as they move around.
- **A loss of community cohesion**, including loss of familial ties, cultural connections, and other support networks as a result of families living outside of their usual community.
- **Psychological impacts**, such as stress, anxiety and relationship challenges, connected to all of the above.

*What we are seeing a lot of lately is whānau placement into inappropriate emergency housing waiting for homes. We have a young family just now, have to give this example because I'm still quite shaken up about it, where a father and his daughter are living in a single room in a hotel awaiting emergency housing that is located too far away from her school, so the father can't get her to that school, there's no cooking facilities there. And that family have been literally moving around since the storms, since they were displaced.  
(Community stakeholder)*

Housing and accommodation needs also centre on **people living under poor, and at times unsafe, conditions** such as with dampness, mould or physical damage. Some remain in homes that have not yet been fixed or have been deemed unsuitable for living through the placard or categorisation process and/or are awaiting categorisation. This includes homeowners who do not want to leave their homes for fear of looting, vandalism and illegal dumping. Some homeowners and tenants do not want to leave their pets or livestock behind, or in the case of intergenerational living, do not want to be separated, so refuse to leave. Others have remained in parts of their homes that have been deemed safe but lack kitchen or bathroom facilities. We were also told that some people do not understand the categorisation classifications, and so have remained in their homes despite the high level of risk.

It was suggested that introducing more flexibility around how to house families (e.g., through portacombs on affected properties so they can remain in close proximity), would be useful and help address some of the above challenges.

The **barriers to homes being repaired** were wide-ranging and include:

- Tenants not telling their landlords about issues or damage as they are worried about the potential implications of doing so (e.g., having to move out for repairs to take place, rent increases, and/or jeopardising tenancy).
- Feelings of shame, particularly among the elderly and members of Pacific communities, regarding the state of their homes, leading to reluctance in allowing agencies inside. Subsequently, damage may go unidentified and unaddressed.

- Lack of finances, or insurance payouts only paying for some issues to be addressed (e.g., internal, superficial repairs paid for, but not outside drainage).
- Ongoing/unsettled insurance claims.
- Unconsented dwellings being affected, and owners not wanting to report this as it may get them into trouble.

Through outreach activities, stakeholders are also finding that the impact of the weather events on homes is ongoing, with damage still emerging. For example, minor issues from before the storms have grown into significant problems but have gone unaddressed because people didn't realise the deterioration was related to the weather events.

Stakeholders also noted that housing and accommodation needs are evolving. For homeowners, the **categorisation process**, which came into effect in October 2023<sup>4</sup> and **subsequent buyouts** are presenting a new phase on their journey and a different set of challenges. This includes:

- Lack of digestible, easy to understand information about the process (and changes from the previous placard approach). As such, people are not always able to make an informed decision as to whether they should opt in or not.
- Waiting for categorisation, adding to an already extensive period of uncertainty.
- Receiving a categorisation that requires reinstatement of the property to a pre-weather event standard. Depending on categorisation, some will receive council support for the repairs. Others must find the funds for the repairs themselves. This can be a challenge, particularly if there is no insurance payout.
- An additional waiting period for settlement to be completed (3-6 months) for those who qualify for a buy-out. These people will have to find a new home in a competitive market and may not be able to stay in their community. There are also financial issues arising for people as the buy-out price is unlikely to cover the cost of a new home, or, for some, the mortgage they had on the home they no longer own. Financial advice needs are emerging for this group of people.
- Landlords needing to evict tenants, which is causing them emotional stress.

### Mental health and wellbeing

Feedback indicates that the trauma of the 2023 weather events is still present for people. However, other ongoing and emerging mental health impacts on residents also featured strongly in discussions with stakeholders. These were linked to a range of issues, including:

- **Anxiety about future adverse weather events.** Interviewees referred to 'wet weather stress', and that rain is still very triggering for people, particularly for children and youth. People are also unclear as to whether there is a community-level plan for how to deal with the next weather event, and how to best prepare for it themselves. This also causes anxiety.
- **Stress and fatigue** from still not having been able to address the impacts of the events. There are still insurance claims to settle, repairs that need to be done, financial strain, and a need to deal with multiple agencies and people. The categorisation process is also causing stress, with

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<sup>4</sup> However, Auckland Council started communicating to high-risk homeowners in June 2023, and many communities consider this the launch for the scheme.

people “feeling forced into categorisation” because they do not have or understand other options.

- **Toll of temporary and unsuitable living arrangements.** Overcrowding, having been relocated outside of their community or tūrangawaewae, lack of stability from moving around, and living in less-than-ideal conditions (as referred to above) are contributing to mental health challenges. A lack of personal space is particularly challenging for teenagers who are going through normal teenage struggles. Some children’s schooling remains disrupted, and stakeholders believe that these temporary living arrangements negatively impact school attendance.
- **Pressure on relationships and family dynamics.** All of the above contribute to relationship challenges. In overcrowded situations, people lack personal space, which can cause tension. Continued financial strain, stress and fatigue also wear on relationships. The pressure is causing relationship breakups, which in turn often leads to additional financial strain.

*When I first started, we were referring a lot of kids to counselling... because the effect that it had on them and even now, you hear from the parents that there's still that anxiety when it rains. (Navigator)*

*It's put a big strain on a lot of families. Like families splitting up and all that. Not just the weather but the financial stress has separated some families that we deal with. (Navigator)*

Stakeholders highlighted the emotions that arise through the categorisation process, and the need to be mindful of being able to offer support through this. It may be anger or frustration, or sadness of losing a home that’s been in the family for generations.

We heard that mental health challenges are particularly difficult for people who had existing mental health needs at the time of the events. The trauma and stress associated with the ongoing recovery has exacerbated these.

Stakeholders mentioned a lack of mental health services for referrals; they felt it is much easier to get support for material needs than for mental health support, and questioned why this is the case when the need is so high. In particular, they noted a lack of appropriate therapeutic programmes for children under the age of seven:

*So, I guess it's one of the age groups [seven-year-olds and younger] that we have sort of left behind in terms of meeting their needs, in terms of wellbeing. (Navigator)*

Stigma was highlighted as a further barrier to addressing mental health challenges and was seen to be particularly strong in Pacific communities, and amongst elderly. People also do not want to take opportunities of support away from others – and so decline support for themselves.

### **Access to information and support services**

Stakeholders emphasised that the need for information and support continues to be very high. Navigating the various systems of council departments, government agencies and insurance companies has been particularly challenging as people work to rebuild their lives. People struggle with conflicting information, different systems, and the mental load of working to access and decipher information. Key challenges and information are mainly related to:

- **Dealing with different parties.** Residents face difficulties such as persistently needing to chase for information and updates, playing phone tag, receiving generic emails, and being passed between different representatives.
- **Home categorisation process.** There is a significant need for clear information and support to understand their options and potential pathways. This includes the pros and cons (or risks) of opting in or out and deciphering technical information. They also require assistance navigating the process and managing finances once the buy-out process is complete. Stakeholders indicated a lack of easily digestible information about the categorisation process, which adds to stress and confusion.
- **Mental health support needs.** Stakeholders highlighted the ongoing need for mental health information and support, including for families of children or youth who have been impacted. They expressed concern about the limited resources available to address mental health needs, and a lack of appropriate services to refer to.
- **Roles and responsibilities in slip and landslide responses.** Residents affected by slips and landslides struggle to navigate the roles and responsibilities of different entities involved in response and reimbursement efforts. The confusion often results in individuals being caught 'between' insurance companies and the earthquake commission because of their individual rules and regulations. In other instances, people are simply falling between the two agencies and are unable to secure support from either.

Language and technical barriers further complicate access to information and support, particularly for those for whom English is a second language and the elderly who lack internet access or digital literacy.

Additionally, there are challenges in reaching all the affected communities, with barriers including distrust, feelings of whakamā (shame), and a lack of awareness of support. Despite the presence of Navigators, not all residents are aware of the support available, particularly those unfamiliar with seeking assistance.

*People who are on the benefit and are used to accessing social services sort of... they found it easier to ask for help. They knew who to turn to. Where [for others] ... this was the most traumatic thing for them, and they didn't know who to turn to and were slow to come forward sometimes. So, we're still finding that people are struggling to navigate the different support systems and understand what is available for them. (Community stakeholder)*

### Preparedness for future weather events

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of informing and supporting residents to better prepare for future emergencies, aiming to build capability and reduce anxiety related to wet weather. Community outreach and information gathering efforts have identified a strong desire among some affected residents to enhance their knowledge and preparedness in this area, with people seeking support for emergency planning and other preparedness aspects.

*[People are seeking guidance and support with] Household emergency or exit plans... access to portable devices for power, lighting and communication, really simple stuff. Essential items at home, emergency go bags, first aid kits, food and water, clothing and*

*bedding in the event of an evacuation.... Simple things, but families need them.  
(Community stakeholder)*

The need to reassure residents that the community *as a whole* is better prepared was also stressed by stakeholders. However, they noted a void of information from Auckland Council regarding future response plans, which has hindered their ability to give reassurance at this stage.

### Financial challenges

There is evidence of extensive financial need in the West Auckland community. Housing and food security, already pressing issues for many at the time of the weather events, have been further strained by the growing cost of living crisis, increased interest rates, and inflation.

In the immediate aftermath of the weather events, financial strain centred primarily on costs related to replacing damaged items and property, private rentals for displaced individuals, fuel expenses for commuting from new locations, and loss of income due to forced relocation. These financial burdens persist, particularly for those without contents insurance and those still in temporary accommodation. Some who have finally secured long-term housing again are now faced with having to start from scratch in terms of belongings.

*When I went to see them when they finally got a house just a couple of months ago after being displaced since January, February. We were sitting on the floor conversing with them, cos they had nothing. (Navigator)*

Key financial issues facing the West Auckland community centred on:

- **Insurance issues.** We were told that many people took insurance claims before having all the information, “*because they just wanted to move on*”. This caused a ripple effect in that people did not necessarily get their entitlements but were then too exhausted to advocate for themselves. As noted elsewhere, insurance did not always cover all repairs needed, leaving people to self-fund which has added to the financial strain. Some people have had to stop work because of the mental stress associated with recovery.
- **Financial demands evolving over time.** For example, insurance for temporary accommodation only lasted 12 months, forcing people to cover rental costs themselves thereafter. This has been particularly hard for homeowners who are still waiting for categorisation and possible council buy-out, as this comes on top of covering mortgage costs. Recent home buyers at the time of the weather events with 100% mortgages face even greater difficulty. While some financial support is available (e.g., from Red Cross), once the insurance runs out, not all are eligible (e.g., if the house is in a trust).
- **Need for financial advice.** There is an emerging need for financial advice once buy-outs go through. Navigators frequently encounter residents unsure of how to manage large amounts of money. For many, the buy-out rate may not be sufficient to buy a new home or even pay off existing mortgages.

*They need sound financial advice on ‘where to from here’. So that is a big, that is a big need and want for those who do accept buy-outs. (Navigator)*

Stakeholders also noted that people whose homes were not affected in the weather events might still suffer financial strain. Properties near category three homes or slips may decrease in value, be difficult to sell, and incur higher insurance costs.

### Infrastructure needs

Stakeholders noted ongoing needs related to stormwater and drainage infrastructure, emphasising the importance of cleaning up streams to prevent future flooding. The state of roads was also highlighted, with extra traffic lights and road closures making it difficult for people to get around. Extended travel times cause frustration when traffic build up is high, particularly for people with limited access routes, which can deter them from undertaking normal, everyday activities.

Additionally, parks and other important local amenities remain in disrepair, further impacting community wellbeing.

*Sometimes there's just big logs sitting in parks near a playground and no one's taking them away. So, you've got this kind of, when you turn up to something that doesn't look very pretty, it kind of doesn't make you feel good anyway. There's that sort of stuff. (Community stakeholder)*

### Environmental impact and community disconnection

Stakeholders indicated that the local environment and community make-up have changed as a result of the weather events. As indicated above, some infrastructure and amenities are still in disrepair, with signs of flooding still evident, such as logs or rubbish lying around. Houses, and in some instances, entire streets, are deserted. Illegal dumping of rubbish on properties also contributes to untidiness, and a sense of abandonment and looting makes people feel unsafe.

A question was raised as to whether infrastructure issues like these would have lingered as long, had the damage occurred in a more affluent area. This perceived neglect has eroded trust in authorities, as people feel their needs are being overlooked.

The community and social impact of these changes are significant in some areas. Community cohesion in particular has been affected. Families have moved away, so social bonds between neighbours may have been broken. Children may have lost their friends to play with on the street after school. People have also lost access to spaces for recreation and gathering, such as swimming holes that are no longer there.

*We're working [...] on a variety of projects around climate resilience really, flood recovery, climate resilience, and that effect on people that might still be living in their house, in their community that still need support and maybe remedy, their house needs fixed or whatever, but like then the surrounding neighbourhood has changed as well, the waterway, where it was and where it now goes might have changed, where their swim spot used to be is no longer there or there's still rubbish in the local park, like it's not just their home and their backyard, it's actually the whole neighbourhood and how it feels and looks different. (Community stakeholder)*

### Impact on community organisations and their workers

Although stakeholders talked about the needs of people in the community, it was clear that there have been significant impacts on them, their colleagues and their organisations. They referred to this

as an 'invisible' impact, highlighting that they've had to deal with a range of events over consecutive years, including the initial COVID-19 outbreak, the Omicron wave, the storms, and more recently inflation and the rising cost of living.

A lot of work had to be put on hold with the storms, as people were seconded to different roles. Some workers have had to deal with the changes and challenges at work, while also dealing with trauma themselves and/or damage to their own properties. Many have not had a proper break for the last three years, and there is a risk that people burn out, or in the least, will not be able to provide a similar response again should there be another event.

*Workers are running out of steam, if the assumption is they can do it again, then that is flawed. (Community stakeholder)*



## 4. Role of organisations and Navigators in supporting recovery needs

This section presents an overview of the work that community organisations and Navigators are undertaking in meeting recovery needs in West Auckland.

As noted earlier in the report, West Auckland community organisations were quick to mobilise, and worked together to address the needs that emerged in their community in the aftermath of the early 2023 weather events. Eighteen months on, funding for recovery-specific support has largely ceased or is about to run out. However, many organisations continue to provide support, albeit to a lesser extent and/or for different types of needs than in the immediate response. Some have pivoted more towards resilience than recovery.

The introduction of Auckland Council’s Storm Recovery Navigators has taken some of the pressure off organisations which, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, are finally starting to find space to return to ‘normal’ business. This is particularly true for the organisations that have contracts for Partner Navigators. However, community organisations still play a large role in outreach activities, and many of the whānau they work with have a mix of needs, which may include recovery-related challenges. As such, the continued recovery response has become embedded in their everyday work. Subsequently, organisations were unable to quantify the current level of recovery-specific support provided to the community.

*If someone drops into the community hub, we meet that person where they're at and maybe refer out to other services or work with them. So, we've got an organisational lens I'd say on [recovery needs] but we haven't got any other specific funding for that.  
(Community organisation)*

*It would be hard to say how many but, we deal with whatever comes through the door and many people, whether it's food support or some other kind of need, floods and cyclones will be part of that. So, we have people that are helping with those things. (Community organisation)*

Navigators estimated they have supported more than a hundred clients each, since starting their roles in September 2023. They described the scope of their role as “huge” – and to entail literally anything and everything, apart from counselling and financial advice. Although Navigators focus more on some specific roles, such as advocacy, there is still some overlap with what community organisations do because of the intertwined nature of recovery needs with pre-existing needs, or needs of the community more generally.

### Roles played by community organisations and Navigators

#### Connector role

Community organisations continue to link affected residents with relevant support services to address their ongoing recovery needs. This includes making referrals to other providers with specialist skills or resources, and to the Recovery Office for navigational support. Some organisations have dedicated

community connector roles that facilitate this process. For Navigators, connecting people with relevant services is a key part in what they do. They leverage existing connections and have built new ones over time.

The range of services that organisations connect with is extensive, and includes housing providers, mental health support, Healthy Homes, Work and Income, Ministry of Social Development, New Zealand Claims Resolution Service, language support, Pātaka Kai, Red Cross, financial advice/budgeting support, different council departments, CV/job search help, and school holiday programmes.

Navigators explained how they draw on their system knowledge and connections with Council and other agencies to ensure that residents are directed to the right place, and that this can help expediate support.

*One of my [displaced] families out South, their car broke down after getting flooded again in Māngere on Sunday and she called me on Monday. She's like "Our car broke down and I can't keep asking people to drop my kids off to school," and she's got a daughter that's special needs as well. And her husband is the only one working and they need that car. So, through our connection with the MSD team, they've helped sort out her car. (Navigator)*

*So, because there's a lot of teams in different departments within the Council, I think we can help families access those different teams, for example rates relief if they're not living in their house or they've got a placard. Also help with Watercare and stormwater drainage problems. We're like a one stop shop where we can connect you to different things. We [also] have internal pathways. So sometimes they can respond to us faster than if they were to just go through the normal public pathway on the Council website. (Navigator)*

The connector role also involves providing information about different services, processes and entitlements. Both community organisations and Navigators print material for people who do not have access to the internet, particularly the elderly.

### Advocacy role

The advocacy role has been ongoing for many community organisations, but the responsibility has gradually eased with the Navigator service coming into play. Recovery-specific advocacy occurs in relation to financial entitlements, insurance issues and housing and accommodation. For Navigators, much of the advocacy role now centres on the categorisation process. Advocacy can involve accompanying people to appointments and ensuring their pathway to answers is as short and direct as possible.

Navigators help by explaining processes and systems, helping people explore different options, providing information for informed decision making, and helping to decipher technical information within their capacity. They also keep people updated and informed about progress, facilitating communication, and sometimes 'nudging' progress where possible.

Navigators spoke of the frustration caused by complex processes (e.g., categorisation), the waiting, and the lack of updates and responses from agencies and council departments. As such, a big part of the advocacy role is to provide reassurance, encouragement and motivation to persevere, and/or to take that next step.

*It's just reassurance of some sort. Like they're just checking in. They want a voice. They want someone to say "And you're still in the process, things are progressing. Sorry I can't give you more, however, this is where things are at." (Navigator)*

### Meeting basic needs

This involves the distribution of material resources, including the provision of food, to families still struggling to recover from the storms. Red Cross vouchers and home bundles (for replacing household items, etc.) have also been provided over time. At the time of writing, some community organisations still had small amounts of money left over from recovery funding, so were able to help with basic needs on an ad hoc basis.

*If someone does show up and there's something that they need, something to be purchased as part of their recovery, we do have small pockets of funding that we are kind of using from time to time to support people. (Community stakeholder)*

Bringing kai along for house visits was common practice for both Navigators and community stakeholders. It helps with relationship building, but also provides some relief for families who are struggling.

*When I go and see whānau for the first time or, and I usually know them, through someone else or I've worked with them before and that, I always take kai, no matter what. (Community stakeholder)*

*I bring a tikanga sort of perspective when I meet with a lot of our whānau. I offer karakia. I ask them what is it that I can support you with. How's it going. How's it going mum? Where is it that I can support and help but I turn up with kai first and foremost. It's practical stuff that we know is needed out there for a lot of our communities. (Navigator)*

One organisation provided 'gear up' boxes, with play and sport equipment for communities to use. Although this was not specifically related to the recovery, they highlighted that many families had lost play equipment in the weather events and that these help to fill that gap for some affected children and youth.

Overall, it was hard for community organisations to know the extent to which people's basic needs are still related to the 2023 weather events, but it is part of their core business to support in this space.

### Counselling and emotional support

Community organisations are offering support or delivering services in relation to residents' ongoing mental health needs. Largely, this centres on general pastoral care for families who are still struggling emotionally because of the weather events and includes school holiday programmes, which were seen to offer a useful escape for children and youth who may still be living in temporary accommodation.

One of the community organisations we spoke with had received funding from the Recovery Office's Wellbeing Fund to provide counselling. They had two staff members focused on this work and were promoting the service at the time of the interview to raise awareness.

Navigators also refer to counselling services, but as noted elsewhere, highlighted a lack of sufficient services to refer to, particularly for younger children. While they were clear that they do not provide counselling, the Navigator role requires them to provide a level of emotional support to their clients who go through a range of emotions in their journeys.

One Navigator noted the challenges associated with being able to address children's emotions related to the weather events. Navigators may notice, or hear through the parents, that something isn't quite right, but parents can be reluctant to take it any further, or there may be simply no services to refer to.

### Outreach activities

Community organisations are engaging in many outreach activities, including community and street events, as well as door knocking, as part of their everyday mahi, and this helps unearth recovery-related needs. Community and street events in particular are useful mechanisms for relationship building, which may enable recovery-related support to be implemented later down the track. Sometimes community workers have to tread carefully, not to impose too much at the start, so they can build the trust necessary for effective support relationships to develop. One organisation had used a recent community event to ask a question about people's preparedness and needs for a future emergency, and whether they wanted to be contacted by the Recovery Office (five families to date had agreed to this contact).

Navigators are also conducting outreach activities, either supporting community organisations or delivering their own. Partner Navigators also hold 'pop-ups', which provide opportunities for residents to engage and access information.

Community stakeholders and Navigators indicated that they had uncovered a range of recovery needs in recent door knocking drives.

### Climate resilience and street clean-ups

Some organisations were working on specific climate resilience and/or street clean-up projects funded through Auckland Council or the Red Cross. These have helped with outreach and in developing relationships with residents.

*[...] so that's working with a range of community groups, whatever those community groups look like, to help navigate preparing for disasters and doing some scenario planning and then helping them through some next steps and then there will be a few others... working in a project with [staff member] around make space for water. (Community stakeholder)*

### Engagement in future planning and preparedness efforts

Community organisations are planning and preparing for potential future emergency events individually, in collaboration with other groups or organisations, and at a broader local level. There were examples of organisations preparing their sites for future events (e.g., building a soup kitchen), using community events to glean information about residents' preparedness needs, and being part of developing initiatives to increase preparedness capability in the community. Local registers containing organisational details, resources and capabilities are emerging, and there are co-design activities from Te Ao Māori perspectives taking place in Māori-led collectives.

*Our HERT group, which is the Hub West Emergency Response Team, and it's a collection of individuals who either some were affected by the storm and want to give back, some were some of our volunteers who worked here at the time, a couple are key members of organisations just put their hand up and we stay connected monthly around if there's another [event] what are we doing to plan, to be really frank, in the void of Auckland City Council's communication about what happens next. (Community stakeholder)*

Organisations highlighted the perceived void of Auckland Council communication and engagement in this space and called for a more coordinated approach to planning. They reported having participated in council-funded research about the response and recovery, without any meaningful follow-up, and that has seemingly led to little action to date. One organisation reported having started planning activities, but after asking for Auckland Emergency Management (AEM) support been asked to stop and wait until AEM had finished their restructure.<sup>5</sup>

*We were told that they would help us develop a plan. We don't want to do it in isolation. We want to get the experts in as well and work collaboratively [with local schools]. Then we were told that they're still kind of regrouping and getting together and when there was a forecast for rain, I'm going "Are we any closer to being prepared? Mm. I don't know about that." We are a little bit but not really. So, what are the needs? We want to get on and get that plan and we want the expert advice. We don't want to be waiting another six months until that group is ready. (Community stakeholder)*

## Relationships and collaborations

West Auckland is unique in that it has a history of longstanding, collaborative and trusting relationships between community organisations. As reported in the West Auckland Emergency study,<sup>3</sup> these relationships were key to West Auckland's effective response during the 2023 weather events. Our research similarly found that these strong relationships and collaborations remain and contribute to the continued recovery response. This is occurring at different levels.

- At one level, we heard that there is **direct organisation to organisation collaboration**, in the sense that they refer between each other, partner to deliver services and programmes, and provide moral support and advice to one another. Partner Navigators located at different providers also work collaboratively, running events together and tapping into each other's complimentary skills to support whānau.
- At the next level, there are **localised and/or Māori-led collectives and networks** (including churches and schools) where groups of organisations or individuals work together in a more formal capacity.
- Finally, there are **'networks of networks'** that provide an umbrella approach across the whole of West Auckland.

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<sup>5</sup> We understand that as part of an Auckland Emergency Management restructure process the Community and Business Resilience Team was disbanded in late 2023, in favour of a planning-focused approach to building community preparedness.

These different levels of collaboration have enabled good systems for communication and information-sharing and there is evidence of activity at all levels in terms of responding to ongoing recovery needs, and in the planning for future emergency events.

*The West Auckland Together collaboration, I think what it has done since COVID really but continues to do, is be a portal for communication to come out to our broker, our collaboration broker and then she can just emanate anything that comes from the Recovery Office or anything relevant, it can kind of come in and go back out. And so those organisations that aren't connected into the updates or don't know where to find them, they, we almost support that other layer of information sharing. So, it's a really good portal for, and our council know that. They know that if they send stuff to West Auckland Together, we are a network of networks, and that information will go out through us. (Community stakeholder)*

There is also outward collaboration occurring. As indicated elsewhere, stakeholders reported engaging with a range of entities to support their recovery-related work, such as government departments, housing providers, and council departments. Existing connections within these entities have enabled collaborative approaches and more effective responses for the people they are supporting.

### Auckland Council

Interactions with Auckland Council that were discussed in the research mainly related to the introduction of Partner Storm Recovery Navigators and the council's lack of engagement with the community in regard to preparing for future emergency events.

Community stakeholders were positive about having Partner Navigators located in the community. They provide a direct contact into the Recovery Office, which supports improved communication and information sharing in both directions. There is hope that this will enable the community to have some influence on Recovery Office policy. We also heard that the community-based Navigators have brought another level of expertise to the Recovery Office Navigator team that complements their internal staff. There was some concern around the short-term nature of the Partner Navigator contracts and hope that these would be extended.

One organisation reported working with AEM and Civil Defence to develop a programme of 'In Case of Emergency' (ICE) workshops that will be delivered to different parts of the community (e.g., churches, schools, local businesses, community centres, etc.). However, over and above this example, community stakeholders reported a lack of communication and engagement by Auckland Council in regard to future response planning.

The lack of interaction by Auckland Council has caused frustration and concerns. Community stakeholders wondered what is happening with all the rich information that has been gathered through research activities, and whether it will be put to good use. Community stakeholders highlighted the need for Auckland Council to engage in this space, to bring in emergency management expertise, draw on research findings to date, and contribute to a collaborative and coordinated plan for any future response. They would also like to see Auckland Council follow through on some of their promises, such as developing a West Auckland register to document in detail the

capacity and capability of West Auckland organisations. There is a clear sense of urgency around this, as the next event could happen any day.

## What is working well

Stakeholders identified a range of factors that were working well in addressing ongoing recovery needs in West Auckland, as follows:

- **Strong relationships between community organisations** enables a collaborative approach to supporting people and quick mobilisation when needed.
- **A coordinated, local approach** with community stakeholders working together to address needs, including the sharing of resources, referrals to other providers, and partnering to deliver services and programmes.
- **Effective local systems for information sharing**, including through collectives such as West Auckland Together.
- **Outreach activities**, such as doorknocking and street events. This was highlighted as an effective approach for initiating relationships with people, particularly with more vulnerable residents.
- **Having Partner Navigators based in the community**. This helps NGOs stay connected with what is happening in the community and provides a direct link into the Recovery Office and Auckland Council. It helps with two-way information flow and has added useful skills and connections.

In addition, Navigators (including Partner Navigators) spoke of what is working well for them as a service. This centred on:

- Having the right people, with empathy and the right connections to do the job well
- Working under pragmatic leaders, who provide sufficient flexibility to not be constrained by processes (Partner Navigators specifically)
- Great team cohesion and support
- Having developed strong relationships with whānau
- Ability for whānau to call Navigators directly, which was not the case at the start (e.g., people had to leave a message and wait to be contacted).

## Challenges

Interviewees highlighted a range of challenges in undertaking the ongoing recovery work, as follows:

- **Difficulties in engaging the local community**, who may face barriers in accessing recovery-related support. As indicated elsewhere, this may include a lack of awareness of what is available, language barriers, and a reluctance to reach out for help. Meanwhile, some are reluctant to *accept* help due to distrust, a sense of whakamā/embarrassment, and concerns about implications of doing so (e.g., may get into trouble for illegal dwelling). There is also a sense of resignation in the community, which impacts on people's motivation to engage.
- **Building trust takes time** but is a pre-requisite before any actual work can commence. Stakeholders were mindful of needing to take the time necessary to tread lightly, be culturally responsive, and to ensure that any onward referrals are to people they trust will take good care of the client.

- **Most funding coming to an end**, while needs continue to be prevalent and therefore work needs to continue. There is uncertainty around whether Partner Navigator contracts will continue or not, and if so, for how long.
- **People losing their patience**, due to timelines not being met and council and agencies ‘passing the buck’ or passing clients between different people. This impacts on the relationships built with community members, who may choose to disengage.
- **Insufficient resourcing for mental health needs** was seen as a key gap in the ability to support people with their recovery needs.
- **Changes within council**, including the restructuring of Auckland Emergency Management, which led to a void of communication, lack of clarity about processes and people’s roles, and a need to build new relationships.
- **Everyone learning on the go**, including community organisations and council staff.
- **Technical language** in council documentation, particularly around categorisation. Terminology is difficult for people to understand, which causes frustration. Navigators themselves struggle with the language and note there are not enough technical council staff on the ground to help decipher this type of information.

*We have failed from the beginning in meeting the timeline and that is the greatest barrier I can say, and it has also... shaken the relationship that we hold with our whānau because we are trying to hold this space that “yes we will get you answers”, but then we are not getting answers to them fast enough, and some of them have waited 15 months and they're still waiting for certain answers. (Navigator)*

*The ones who need the help the most, refuse the help. Because they think that somebody deserves it more than they do. (Community stakeholder)*

## Future needs and priorities

This section offers insights into the perspective of community stakeholders regarding the requirements for sustaining recovery within West Auckland, including Auckland Council’s role within this.

### Auckland Council re-engagement

As noted elsewhere, stakeholders called for Auckland Council to re-engage with the West Auckland community. Despite the efforts of Navigators and the Recovery Office in ongoing recovery work, community stakeholders feel that recent changes and restructures within council have created a communication void that urgently needs to be addressed, particularly regarding future response planning. Stakeholders want to know:

- Where the council is at in terms of their plan going forward
- What the expectations are on the community in the next event
- Whether the research done to date will be brought together in some digestible format
- Whether the research to date will inform planning for future events and potential investment in this space
- When Auckland Council will develop a provider register as indicated they would.



Importantly, stakeholders wanted to know how Auckland Council can add value to what the community already does well and hoped that the research done to date can inform a response to this. They also noted that a register of providers would need appropriate resourcing to go with it, so that it can be updated and maintained over time.

### More responsive and joined up systems

Stakeholders identified a need for more responsive and joined-up systems to support the ongoing recovery effort, and to ensure future emergency responses are as effective as possible. Community stakeholders wanted processes for keeping council and the community connected and informed. Navigators asked for faster processes for getting answers about technical questions, and a more coordinated approach for sending staff from other departments out into the field (e.g., so that they don't all go door knocking at the same time, or that they do so collaboratively). Navigators would also like better pathways for building relationships within council, such as opportunities to attend meetings so they can provide input and take information back to the team.

### More and sustained resourcing for much needed services and supports

Stakeholders agreed that the navigation service needs to be continued for at least another year, and that Partner Navigators in particular need to be funded beyond their current contractual terms. As indicated elsewhere, there were also calls for additional and/or sustained resourcing for mental health support to enable residents to address their mental health needs. Resourcing for child-specific mental health support was seen as a priority.

### Resourcing community organisations

As noted earlier, community organisations are running out of funds to support the ongoing recovery work. Although they did not ask for additional funding per se, stakeholders did seek recognition from council of the toll the response and recovery work has taken on workers, and acknowledgement that staff will need support to build back their resilience so that they can be ready for another event. It is difficult for community organisations to provide the space and resource for this to occur, as they are grappling with the backlog of work that has built up since the COVID-19 pandemic and through the recovery phase.

Community organisations also talked about expectations on them from Auckland Council to plan and undertake crisis management, when they lack the capacity and capability to do so. They would like to see some recognition that this takes time away from the running of their organisations, and some emergency management training provided to them. They said there is often a mismatch between funds provided to set themselves up to respond, and organisational capacity. Resourcing for relationship building was also identified as an opportunity:

*I managed in getting a generator for a community, it was the perfect sort of thing that this fund allowed for, and I think that's brilliant, and communities need that, but I haven't seen pockets of funding that goes, okay here's some funding to make some connections so that the conversations can [continue], so you know who to talk to in Council or in different positions. (Community stakeholder)*

### Infrastructure and planning

Stakeholders would like to see council addressing infrastructure damage and planning at a faster rate.

We heard that the community is concerned about their environment and the infrastructure, and that many questions are channelled to Navigators regarding these issues. As such, more communication from council to the community around what is happening and what the plan is going forward would be useful. There is also a need for creeks to be cleaned up to prevent flooding in the next weather event. We were told this is currently undertaken in silos and could be accomplished more effectively through collaborative approaches between entities such as the Recovery Office, Healthy Waters and Twin Streams.

When considering Auckland Council’s recovery role, stakeholders also mentioned their practical needs for future weather events, such as storage of equipment (e.g., generators, chargers, non-perishable foods) that can be accessed in response efforts.

### Longer-term concerns regarding local area risks

Longer term concerns expressed by interviewees when considering local area risks are summarised in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Long term concerns**

Concern	Description
Community preparedness for future weather events	This included risks related to a lack of preparedness amongst residents, service providers and Auckland Council – but particularly the lack of an overall plan.
Infrastructure capacity	Stakeholders expressed concerns about the capacity of infrastructure to withstand future adverse events, particularly in areas which were shown to be vulnerable to flooding.
The effect on un-affected and repaired houses	This includes the financial impact on homeowners who may not be able to sell their homes, should they want to, or insure them for future events.
Redevelopment and intensification	This includes concerns regarding the quality, density, and location of future housing developments, and their impact on infrastructure. It incorporated fears regarding the potential for flooding within new developments, particularly those being built on perceived “flood plains”.
Natural environment	Stakeholders highlighted the need for environmental climate resilience, and wondered what can be done, and what/if there is a plan going forward.

## 5. Conclusion

This needs assessment has identified a range of ongoing challenges faced by the West Auckland community linked to the adverse weather events in early 2023. Nearly 18 months after the last event, families are still grappling with immediate and newly emerging needs. The prolonged disruption to daily life has taken a serious emotional toll on residents, which must be addressed with urgency.

It is important to acknowledge that the full nature and extent of needs may not be currently known, given evidence that some community members are either reluctant or face barriers seeking help. However, this assessment, being the third report in this series, shows a consistent pattern of need across different areas, indicating the necessity for ongoing monitoring and the continuation of regular outreach activities to establish or maintain connections with those in need.

There is a very high level of collaboration in the West Auckland community, with well-established systems for information-sharing and communication. There are pockets of emergency management expertise, and a strong commitment from organisations to serve their community effectively. This collaborative spirit supports ongoing recovery efforts and provides a strong foundation for future responses. However, the community's capacity to respond should not be taken for granted; ongoing resourcing and support are needed to sustain this level of efficiency.

The Recovery Office's Navigation service is making a significant difference in the West Auckland community and is particularly useful for helping people through the categorisation process and building connections with those who may not be accessing assistance. Bearing in mind that the categorisation process is now confirmed to continue into 2025,<sup>6</sup> consideration should be given to ensuring the navigation service is sufficiently resourced, for enough time, to navigate those affected.

Of key concern to stakeholders is the lack of an Auckland Council supported community wide response plan for West Auckland. While there is work happening at individual and organisational levels, there is no unified strategy for addressing future events. This research, along with other studies conducted since the weather events, provide a good starting point for Auckland Council to re-engage with the West Auckland community to develop a collaborative and coordinated response plan. A more integrated approach will be key to facilitate a more effective and cohesive response in the future.

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<sup>6</sup> As reported by RNZ, 10th June 2024: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/519057/auckland-floods-some-homeowners-left-waiting-until-2025-for-buyout-news>