

After the flood

There may be lessons from last month's floods that could apply to the whole of the country, COLLEEN BROWN writes.

It's the Sunday after the Auckland floods. I'm standing near my old school friend Jo Lodge's childhood home in Tennessee Ave, Māngere. The street backs onto a creek, where Jo's brothers used to play with their neighbours. On the first day of Auckland's deluge, that same creek morphed into a fully fledged river, viciously gouging out backyards, tossing cars, rubbish bins and sleepouts aside, before slinking back into the mangroves and mud. I expected bustle, noise and movement, but everything is quiet.

Walking towards me is my Neighbourhood Support mate Toni Helleur, her reassuring smile matching the brilliance of her fluorescent jacket. Toni and her companions are checking in with their community, house by house, ruined house.

We stop beside a stormwater drain; the grille has popped and been swept away. It's a gaping steel maw in the kerb. Toni has placed an orange cone next to it. She explains that some years ago, a child died falling into an uncovered drain like this. Memories of such tragedies remain part of the community folklore. You can imagine the parents whispering to their children, "Fa'aeteete, take care, fa'aeteete, be careful."

People are in shock. It's not just this Māngere street. It's most parts of Auckland, and many parts of the North Island. Big stretches of disaster and despair.

Where to start? What to do? Where to go? Those are the questions everyone asks. I watch Toni distribute her hastily generated handouts detailing the various agencies that can help. Empathy, connection, solutions.

I peer down a fence line and into a backyard. The garage and sleepout are wrecked. If the house is habitable, four more people than usual will sleep there tonight. People are quietly pulling objects out of their homes: ruined mats, sodden couches, dripping mattresses. All they can do is dump them on their front lawn. Their cars are wrecked by the floodwaters. It happened so fast, people were focused on saving lives, not objects.

Not everyone could afford insurance. Some have lost their cars, homes and contents, and have no way of moving the debris off their property. People's faces are blank – it is all too much.

I hear it again and again: "Where is the council? What's happening?" And in the void, people fall back onto what is familiar – reaching out to their Covid-19 contacts.

When Auckland Council's response to the January floods is scrutinised, attention must be paid to the size of the Emergency Management budget reserved to cover the needs of this extremely diverse city.

In the years of my association with Auckland's Emergency

Management team, it appears the number of people on the ground has dwindled and communities have been "encouraged" to be "resilient", and "self-sufficient". Any local "plan" achieved using that framework becomes patchy, disjointed, and unco-ordinated.

Other emergency centres across the country seem to be able to rise to the challenge and work with their communities when the chips are down. Basically, it boils down to having a strong community development model – a network of trusted council staff embedded into the community, dedicated trained emergency staff and ongoing community education.

The former Manukau and Waitākere city councils understood this. Now, under the so-called SuperCity, council relationships feel fragmented, distant and

bureaucratic. There is a different tone to the communication. Auckland Council is missing something that's hard to define, but to me it seems to have lost a sense of connection, duty or even obligation.

Perhaps other areas of New Zealand are right to be wary of amalgamation. Or maybe it's just an issue that Auckland itself needs to address.

We leave Māngere. As we do, I see the full church carparks. If you listen, you can hear the singing. Voices uplifted in church after church, thanking the Lord for another day. For saving their family.

Even though people have lost so much, they haven't lost their faith. Thank goodness. ■

Colleen Brown is the chair of Counties Manukau Neighbourhood Support and a former Manukau city councillor.



Sodden furniture is pulled out of a house in Māngere after the resident was evacuated.

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