

In the neighbourhood

Neighbourhood Support has outgrown its “nosy neighbour” roots to perform a local networking role that beats social media, writes COLLEEN BROWN. • photograph by TE ROMA TAUHINU

In this digital age, connecting with your neighbours and guarding your property have never been easier. We’ve got a plethora of online tools to stay in touch, and to keep an eye on our surroundings at all times.

So, aren’t those letterbox and power-pole signs warning that Neighbourhood Support is also watching so last century? Apparently not. Staff in the organisation’s head office, housed in the police national headquarters in Wellington, say they’ve never been busier.

Initially known as Neighbourhood Watch, the organisation has been around in the United States since the 1960s and in New Zealand since the late 70s. Launched here as a crime-prevention initiative by the police, it changed its name in the 90s to distance itself from perceptions that it was a network of nosy neighbours snitching on each other. These days it works in partnership with the police, and claims to have 69 groups across New Zealand whose goal is to keep communities connected and safe.

Chief executive Tess Casey has previously worked in the community sector, and says the connection between neighbours is just as important as the safety factor. “Back in the day, the organisation was about security. Today, it has to reflect our modern lives. It’s important for people to feel good about where they live and who they live next to,” she says.

In these days of social-media overload, it’s also essential that neighbourhoods receive verified information, Casey says. “Quite

frankly, social media as a tool is both a blessing and a curse. It’s a great communication tool, but it doesn’t replace face-to-face connections. People not on social media are excluded. It’s that knock on the door, a text or that face-to-face meeting – even masked – which can consolidate a community. It builds trust.”

In the tiny Northland community of Ōtiria, just outside Moerewa, Pamela-Anne Ngohe-Simon and Hariata Shortland have worked hard to win over the locals.

“We drove a Cadillac around delivering the hampers. People loved it.”

For Ōtiria, located on a floodplain, with no town water supply and no fibre connection, community is everything. There are only 25 houses in the area, but there are also two marae, a century-old sports club, school, road, railway station, waterfalls, a cycle trail and cemetery. Most people live on their ancestral land – their tupuna whenua.

The pair decided to set up a group last November in response to frequent flooding in the area. “We’d never heard of Neighbourhood Support until we went to this meeting where someone was presenting about it,” says Ngohe-Simon. “We saw the struggle people were having with Covid and then we had the floods,” she says. “We went to

each house and I asked if I could put their phone numbers on a telephone tree. We laminated the page and put a fridge magnet on the back.”

Even though most locals know each other well, they still needed to be won over. “People don’t give their trust easily here,” says Ngohe-Simon. “People come, make promises, and then go, taking their promises with them.”

Dealing with the aftermath of flooding is devastating, she says. “Some of these homes have been flooded many times. For years we’ve had promises to fix the flooding, but it’s hard to make progress when you don’t sit on the committees, or you have people representing you who don’t actually live here.”

To pull the community together, last Christmas the group organised a “dress up your letterbox” competition, with a hamper for every family. “We drove a member’s Cadillac convertible around delivering the hampers. People loved it.”

The group has also worked with the local fire brigade on a pilot project to create a fire safety plan. With no reticulated water in Ōtiria, if there is a fire and the engines arrive, they have to rely on people’s tank water and the local creek. “Using the Neighbourhood Support network, we got more houses with alarms installed in two hours in Ōtiria than the fire officers normally could do in two weeks or more.”

CONNECTION IS CRITICAL

In West Auckland, Louise Grevel understands her community intimately. She not only co-ordinates Neighbourhood Support

for the Waitākere region, she also chairs the national organisation, and still finds time to wear a multitude of other community hats, including being a volunteer firefighter.

Grevel says she initially got involved because she wanted her kids to grow up in a safe community. These days, she is able to connect people to create solutions themselves. "It's not up to us to march in and tell people what to do. Locals know best."

The pandemic, she says, has reminded many people of the importance of knowing their neighbours. "People have had to reset their lives and they've understood that social connection is critical. In West Auckland, we've identified all the vulnerable people on our database, especially the elderly. For them, it is all unknown and scary, so we've done personal telephone calls and welfare checks to make sure they're all right."

The organisation's key phrase is "Look out, reach out, help out". "If we all did that, life would be so much better," says Grevel. "I feel good helping others. I live two minutes from the fire station, so I felt it was a waste of resource not being involved. I love it. If you turn up in your pyjamas, no one cares."

INEQUALITY AND POVERTY

Sometimes, the work involved is far from glamorous, as Auckland Central MP Chlöe Swarbrick can attest. Having lived in the electorate for many years, she understands its intricacies. The area does not just include the inner city, she notes, but also the Hauraki Gulf.

"We have about 100 people registered as homeless, sleeping rough, and high rates of transiency – people with very complex needs – and 40,000 people living in dense housing developments," Swarbrick says. "It is a youthful, ethnically diverse electorate. There are visible issues of inequality and poverty, which offends some people who want me to 'do something', to sort it."

Swarbrick has a simple message for those people: "No one is coming to save us. We have to do it ourselves. So, the question is, 'How do we support you to build a community?'"

She believes there is a lack of connection and community in the inner city. Although the police can deal with low-level crime, people have to develop their own solutions as well, she says. In her own case, that has meant working with those who know the city, including the police, Māori wardens, the Aotearoa New Zealand Sex Workers' Collective, businesses and inner-city dwellers.

The issues can be messy and hard. "Essentially, people have to find the time to help

build this new and different community. Is there a role for Neighbourhood Support, especially in the inner city? Yes, there is, but there has to be a lot of honest talk across the community before that stage is reached."

In the South Auckland suburb of Māngere, Toni Helleur and her small band of Neighbourhood Support volunteers are becoming old hands at this work. Helleur has operated her own sports massage business since she

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was 19. For her, the same principles apply across both her business and community work: listen to people's pain, find the root cause, and work through possible solutions.

Helleur initially became involved as a street contact at the suggestion of a local police officer, and is now responsible for co-ordinating an area that includes 70,000 people. "One minute I'm involved in doing a local gardening project; next minute I'm at a regional meeting. People think of Māngere as being not only in the 'too hard basket', but

also as being just one area. It has old established areas around Māngere Mountain, where immigrant Chinese market gardeners were, through to Māngere Bridge and the newly redeveloped Kainga Ora complexes around Māngere Town Centre."

Many locals tend to be private, she says. "It may take more than a year before a neighbour will say hello to you. They come together if there is a problem."

However, the group has a thriving Facebook page and organises popular events. It also tries to get on the front foot with issues in the community, especially if they are complicated. Despite that, prospective partners don't always see the value immediately, Helleur says. "For example, we told Kainga Ora that it would be useful for them to put our Neighbourhood Support welcome packs for residents in their new complexes. They ignored our advice. After we helped resolve some local issues, it finally clicked with Kainga Ora that this was a preventive measure that worked."

Trust, she agrees, is a crucial issue. "We are a trusted bridge between the community and the police. People will not snitch on their neighbours, especially renters who are scared of eviction. We have these street chats – we pick up a huge amount of community intelligence over a cup of coffee. From those chats we've found out about gang standover tactics and also some



From left, Māngere co-ordinator Toni Helleur, Mia King, Carlene Kelso and Toni Hirovanuaa at the street chat coffee cart.



Neighbourhood Support offers the person-to-person contact that can't be matched by online platforms.



Kelly Young, left, co-ordinator of the Community Networking Trust in Gore, with Senior Sergeant Cynthia Fairley.

prostitutes working in housing complexes. So, we met the prostitutes with their pimp and sorted out a few problems. We've now got regular meetings between all agencies. With this sort of approach, issues like this can be resolved before they become a crisis."

CRITICAL PARTNERSHIP

Deputy Police Commissioner Wally Haumaha believes the police have made important strides in building relationships with the public since he joined the force in the mid-1980s. It works both ways, he notes. "There is this critical partnership between society and the police. We have a social licence to police by consent. And that licence has to be built on trust," he says.

In Haumaha's mind, partnerships like the one with Neighbourhood Support enable the police to be more effective within the community, and to understand it in a different way. "In the past, we worked more in parallel, but now the police work far more closely with the community, sitting alongside them in many forums, and that change has to be a good thing."

This style of policing also has its challenges, he admits. "How we devolve power to the community, and at the same time support them to do what they think is right, is part of the social investment approach we use that works well, but it takes time," says Haumaha.

GALVANISING PEOPLE

Neighbourhood Support isn't just for city-dwellers – it is gradually expanding in rural areas. After working in the southern police district for 28 years, Senior Sergeant Cynthia Fairley has supported the rollout as a way to reconnect rural people and help them feel safer.

Fairley works closely with Kelly Young, who is the co-ordinator of the Community

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Networking Trust and Connected Eastern Southland, in Gore.

The trust was established 21 years ago to help local people access social and community services, and it was after attending a meeting which Fairley also attended that Young realised she, too, could play a part.

It turned out to be a bigger role than she originally anticipated. "I went to the Neighbourhood Support 'Grow Conference' in 2021 and listened and stole ideas from across the country, which saved us a

lot of time and energy. The best advice I got was to invest in our database. It took time but we did it."

At the height of the Covid outbreak, says Fairley, neighbours ramped up their efforts to support each other. But it shouldn't take such extreme events to galvanise people, she says. "We need eyes and ears in the community who can help not only in an emergency or disaster, but who also stand up and say 'enough is enough', and report behaviours that are causing harm. It can be about preventing escalation."

Fairley acknowledges many people are fatigued from dealing with Covid, but hopes community interaction will gradually increase as life returns to a more even keel. "Even rurally, things have changed," she says. "People have moved on. Covid has taught us that connecting with neighbours does have a feel-good factor and gives us a purpose. We have vulnerable people in our neighbourhoods who need others to look out for them, keep them safe. We all need to show some humanity."

Even simple things like checking on an elderly neighbour whose bin isn't out on rubbish day can be valuable, adds Young. "It's the little things that add up and count."

Disclosure of interest: Colleen Brown is on the national board of Neighbourhood Support.