

Te Pito Mata

Trapped Community Potential



Image credit: National Library of New Zealand

Social Impact Report for the Levin Landfill

Prepared for Horowhenua District Council by Bronwyn Kerr

Executive Summary

The 'pito mata' is the uncooked portion of kūmara that is kept aside to grow more kūmara in the future. Metaphorically, it can refer to the potential in a person or community. This report has been titled 'Te Pito Mata' to reflect the reservoirs of skill, passion and time that will be released for the Levin community by closing the Landfill, and by engaging in a genuine reconciliation process.

The Levin Landfill has become a contentious issue, which has also taken on a symbolic significance representing wider community dissatisfaction with the state of the environment, council communication, and community relationships. Early closure of the Levin Landfill will be a significant contribution to re-building social trust, and will release significant community energy and potential for more productive, community-enhancing projects.

The current Horowhenua District Council has inherited a region with a highly degraded environment and toxically high levels of community mistrust in the council. Particularly affected sectors of the community include the Hōkio community, Ngāti Pareraukawa, Muaūpoko hapū, and environmental groups.

The main sources of this conflict are; the wider history of colonisation and how it has played out in the Horowhenua, recent council actions of intimidation and dishonesty, and a previous mayor's stated (but not official) policy of divide and rule with Māori communities. The historic apathy of the Manawatū-Whanganui Regional Council (Horizons) has also played a significant role.

The community now sees the Landfill as a 'make or break' issue; where early closure will start the process of healing broken relationships, release community potential, and ease the burden of a litigious atmosphere. Delaying closure will likely entrench toxic patterns, and make it even harder for the council and community to work productively together for the Levin area.

An apology, in the right circumstances, can be an important ingredient to restoring relationships. This report also presents some advice for further reconciliation work, and the development of effective partnership relationships.

He mihi

He mihi nui ki ngā mana whenua o te rohe, nā koutou ngā take taiao i hāpai, mai rā anō,
He mihi maiohi ki te mahi māia a Heka mā,
He mihi ki Kaunihera e arataki ana i te rohe.

Ko wai au?

Nō Koterangi, nō Ingarangi hoki ngā tūpuna
Kei Taitoko i tipu ake ai au, e tata ana ki a Waipunahau.
Ko Ross rāua ko Sally Kerr ōku mātua,
Kei Taitoko tōku whānau e noho tonu ana, engari Te Whanganui a Tara ahau e noho ana.
Ko Bronwyn Kerr tōku ingoa.

My name is Bronwyn Kerr, I grew up in Levin but now live in Wellington. I am a frequent visitor back to Levin, as my family, including my three gorgeous irāmutu, live here.

I hold a Master's Degree in Applied Social Work, a Postgraduate Diploma in Economics, a Postgraduate Diploma in Kaitiakitanga (bicultural community development), as well as postgraduate study in Mandarin and te Reo Māori.

I currently undertake a variety of contract work, including youth work, restorative justice, community mediation, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi workshops and supervision.

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Report Process

I was engaged by the Horowhenua District Council mid-2019 to undertake a restorative justice project with regards to the environment and community relationships. This had a holistic focus on the local environment and community groups and was not landfill-specific. However, given the work of the Hōkio Landfill Project management Group (PMG), the Landfill became a key aspect of my conversations with the community. This process has given me the luxury of spending time with people, and hearing how various issues intersect for them.

I have been honoured by the willingness of people, both in the council and community, to meet and talk. The generosity of people on all sides who are willing to keep trying is impressive.

I was then commissioned to write this social impact report in February 2020. I met again with several people to clarify issues specific to the Landfill, that had previously been discussed in more general terms. Everything in this report has been corroborated by different people. Some instances do not reach an evidential level of proof. However, I have included them because they are a measure of the depth of community feeling and mistrust.

The report covers the negative social impacts of the Landfill itself and of both council's (in)action in relation to the landfill. However, I hope that the impression readers are left with, is of the potential for community cohesion and energy, following an early landfill closure.

This report stands alongside the cultural reports of Ngāti Pareraukawa and Muaūpoko. In any community, effects on hapū are also effects to the wider public.

Part One: The Environment, Relationships and the Landfill

Context – The Environment and Relationships

Repeatedly, community members emphasise that the various environmental issues of lakes, streams, the landfill and waste water disposal at the Pot are all interconnected. They are linked by waterways, served by the same council, and worried about by the same environmental groups and hapū.

Currently, community members do not trust council information about the environment, and there is extensive mistrust within the community as well. This makes trying to take positive action on any one aspect of the environment difficult, as information and energy is siloed into various groups that struggle to work together.

1. A sense of hopelessness

There is a sense of hopelessness and burnout regarding the Horowhenua environment. Several people who have previously been involved in community work were willing to talk to me, but said they would not be involved in any public processes, as there is not enough trust. One couple said 'we would love to be involved with the environment, but everyone that does, gets hurt'. Another said, 'I pulled back, it's soul-destroying'.

2. Community Intimidation

There were several examples told to me of people that had 'stood up for the environment' or 'disagreed with council' feeling intimidated or experiencing reprisals. This included people who;

- Were assaulted and told it was from the council;
- Feel that their businesses or projects were sabotaged as reprisal for speaking up to council;
- No longer speak at council meetings because they felt ignored and disrespected.
- Feel council meetings have been emotionally unsafe for women and Māori, 'it's the old boys' club';
- Councillors using obscene verbal abuse to women (calling women 'bitches' and 'cunts') in public meetings;
- Councillors acting in physically intimidating ways in public settings; *and*
- A councillor implying that an environmental activist was a paedophile.

Many people also talked about feeling the council has influence with local police and media, so they are also wary of these institutions. They;

- Are afraid to leave Hōkio and go into Levin because 'the police follow them around';
- Were called by the police, and questioned about a protest, in a way they found intimidating. This person was told by the police the call was at the council's request;
- Perceive that the police don't care about Hōkio, and so do not call the police if they experience crime in Hōkio, but rather go to local gang members for help.

I have chosen not to spend time in this report on proving these allegations. I believe that in general they are true, because I heard them from such a culturally and socio-economically diverse range of Hōkio residents. Regardless, these stories show the depth of community mistrust and need the need for extensive reconciliation work.

I also note that this is an environment in which conspiracy theories can thrive, as no-one knows who to believe. This makes genuine grievances hard to investigate, and potentially 'enhanced' ones hard to disprove.

For many of these incidents, people offered proof, such as emails, photos, etc. I have chosen not to attach these, as I think litigating the details would be a distraction from accepting the overall pattern of harmful behaviour.

3. Opaque communication and Litigation

Hōkio residents feel they have been made out to be the 'crazies' down at the beach. A new member of local environmental groups was speaking to a councillor (who didn't know her connections). He said 'we don't listen to that bunch of nutters'. Ngāti Pareraukawa feel that the 'council has stonewalled us for decades'.

This is the origin of a current situation where both council and the community are spending thousands of dollars on legal fees and experts, fighting each other.

4. 'Divide and Rule' of Māori

Several people told me that staff during a previous mayor's term stated that he had a 'stated policy' of 'divide and rule' when it came to local Māori communities. Police officers have also talked about a culture of racism within the local police. These are perceived to be linked.

There is also a belief that money is used as a pay-off to sub-sections of the community, to silence dissent rather than solve issues. This has a range of negative impacts; those that receive money for any projects working alongside council in the environmental and cultural spaces feel vulnerable, and others feel excluded. Distrust breeds resentment, and makes future collaboration more challenging.

There is a strong community feeling that divisions within Māori communities have been exacerbated and used by council as an excuse for the environmental situation. Councillors have been overheard bad-mouthing and ridiculing local hapū. In particular, people have said 'they use Phil as a convenient excuse'.

5. My Experiences

My experiences doing the background work for this report have highlighted for me the destructive impact of past communication styles on the community. It has taken a long time to find out about the relevant court cases, people and dynamics. Most people were only willing to talk with me because I'm from Levin, and after someone else they trusted had first talked to me. My being paid by the council was a significant barrier for some.

All of this has created a situation where it is very hard to bring in outside expertise, which becomes a cycle in itself. Several people have talked about 'people that come in, think they understand the situation, and leave making everything worse'. I have the sense that national government and departments avoid the Horowhenua because of this exact dynamic, it's 'too hard'. We collectively need to work on community healing, to be able to access the development and support our community is entitled to.

6. Impacts on Council Staff

The impacts on council staff are obvious, it is very hard, and potentially unsafe, for frontline workers to do their jobs. They are walking into decades of mistrust. There is also a community perception that 'good staff' that care about them are moved on. I note that there have been 5 different council representatives in the Neighbourhood Liaison Group (NLG) in 6 years. NB: The NLG is a mandated group to allow community and council to work together on environmental issues.

The Landfill – Environment and Relationships

The landfill should be considered in the wider context above. This section discusses some specific issues relating to the landfill itself.

1. Health Consequences

Community members, especially close neighbours to the tip, spoke of long-term health consequences. This includes respiratory and skin issues. One person stated that she broke into a strong skin rash, immediately after moving to the area.

The Grange family was particularly affected. A confidentiality clause has dissuaded them from speaking publicly about this. It is fair to say that other members of the community feel aggrieved on their behalf, and that the Grange family's situation was only dealt with 'when we forced the council to'.

2. Council Dishonesty and Relationships

Evidence given to the environment court spelled out instances of the council not being completely honest with the community about the Landfill. Some examples of this are;

- Previously assuring Pareraukawa that there would be no leachate contamination into the Hōkio stream from the dump site
- Refusing to convene NLG meetings for nearly four years (these are required to be organised by the HDC at least once a year);
- The council publicly blaming the NLG for the cost of hearings about tip non-compliance; *and*
- Assuring the Kāpiti Coast District Council that the tip was fully compliant with its RMA conditions, when it was not.

Community members also discussed other events they feel were dishonest;

- A council-initiated newspaper article stating that the council recycling project was going well, when in reality the waste was just being stockpiled; *and*
- A newspaper article stating there were only ‘two verified’ odour reports, when there was an opaque, changing complaints system, effectively making it impossible for residents to submit odour reports.

Processes aimed at monitoring the landfill have been experienced as dishonest and disempowering. In his sworn evidence to the Environment Court one community member spelt out the changing nature of the odour reporting policy. Other community members have discussed feeling shamed or talked down to when trying to report odours. One said she was ‘yelled at’ by a Horizons staff member when he visited her property. I acknowledge that this is an issue shared between Horizons and HDC. Currently there is a huge degree of cynicism about council information and processes to do with the landfill specifically, and the environment more generally. Looking at the history, this suspicion is understandable.

3. Impacts on Hōkio

One community member described the Hōkio community as ‘clearly broken’ as a result of divisive council communication. The confidentiality (gagging) clause on the Grange family is seen as an example of this, breeding rumours and mistrust. There is a widespread sense that Hōkio is ‘the dumping ground of the community’. Hōkio residents feel cut off from Levin by the tip, and feel that Levin people ‘don’t care about us out here’. Along with the pollution to the Hōkio stream, the dilapidated old Boys’ Home, and the Pot, the Landfill makes residents feel they live in a second-class area.

Within the small, interconnected Hōkio community, impacts on hapū are also felt by the whole community. In particular, past actions which have caused division within hapū now make overall community functioning difficult.

4. Trapped Community Potential

A quick survey of key members of Ngāti Pareraukawa and HEKA (Hōkio Environment and Kaitiaki Alliance) showed that thousands of hours of unpaid labour have gone into hearings and actions about the Landfill. Both the community and the council have also put significant money into legal actions around the landfill. In the words of one Hōkio resident, ‘they use my money to fight me’. This is money, energy and goodwill that could be used more productively.

In particular, the Levin community has been made poorer by the mass exodus of Ngāti Pareraukawa members as result of the Landfill (and earlier the Hōkio Stream degradation and nearby piggery). Pareraukawa people would be unlikely to say this (Kāore te kumara e kōrero ana mō tōna reka,- The kumara does not boast of its own sweetness) but they include an intimidating number of nationally and internationally renowned political, environmental and community development experts. By degrading their land and environment, the community forces them to use their energy resisting and cleaning up, rather than by engaging in community development and growth.

Current Processes – A Double-Edged Sword

The current landfill agreement process has been an exercise in community and council working together, which has brought a sense of hope and a willingness to lean into positive relationships. However, there have also been delays and gaps in communication that have also led to ongoing suspicion and mistrust.

If the process ends in early closure, people will feel that going out on a limb was worth it. If not, people will feel more burned.

1. Working together

The general sense I've heard from the community is guarded hope, 'I think maybe the council is changing', 'I hope it lasts'. While this exercise in working together has been bumpy, hopefully an outcome that everyone thinks is positive will be the foundation for more efficient collective processes in the future.

2. Delays

There have been several delays which have been the cause for ongoing distrust, these include: a significant delay in refunding court costs to the community, and ongoing confusion about the odour reporting process, and significant delays in communication with both Ngāti Pareraukawa and Muaūpoko regarding cultural impact assessments.

Beyond this, there has been a severe reluctance to consult with Muaūpoko, despite that Iwi being named in the landfill agreement. This lack of communication with Muaūpoko is worrying in the context of the council being harmfully selective in which hapū and iwi they consult with in various situations.

I acknowledge that Ngāti Pareraukawa has played a key long-term role in taking action to prevent and minimise harm from the landfill.

Conclusion

The Levin Landfill has had significant negative effects on the Hōkio community, tāngata whenua, and environmental groups. These include; health impacts; and erosion of trust in the HDC, Horizons and other institutions. The landfill has also been a drain on community time, money and energy.

Early closure for the landfill, and genuine efforts to remediate the site will begin to ameliorate the environmental and health impacts, and is a necessary precursor to further reconciliation work.

Part Two: Conciliation

I have chosen the term 'conciliation' as 'reconciliation' implies there has previously been a positive relationship. In the case of interactions with Muaūpoko and Ngāti Pareraukawa, the current council inherits a long history of destructive behaviour. Current councillors are not responsible for this, but do inherit the legacy of the past.

Apology

For an apology to be acceptable to many in the community, it needs to be unreserved and unconditional regarding past actions by the HDC. The content of the apology could be generally guided by the harms detailed in this report. It should come alongside or after one of the following actions;

1. The announcement of an early closure date, *or*,
2. An official statement by the council that they believe early closure is the best option.

Work still needs to be done to establish the best location and tikanga for the apology to take place.

Further Conciliation

For the development of a healthy relationship with Ngāti Pareraukawa there needs to be;

1. The earliest possible closure of the landfill, full remediation of the site, and full protection for the Hōkio Stream from any leachate contamination,
2. A genuine meaningful apology for past actions,
3. A sustainable outcome for the pot,
4. An easing of the current burdens on Pareraukawa engaging in these processes,
5. (*and perhaps*) Assistance to Pareraukawa to rebuild the capacity they have lost through people moving away because of the combined impact of the polluting of Hōkio stream, the landfill, the pot, and the piggery.

For the development healthy relationship with environmental groups there needs to be;

1. A genuine apology,
2. A genuine attempt to listen to community concerns,
3. HDC, Horizons and community groups working together to ensure information is shared, processes are clear, and consultation is open.
4. Some structured agreement about future collaboration.

Regarding conciliation with Muaūpoko, proactive engagement from council has been lacking. This discussion has not progressed to the point where steps can be outlined. I suggest the council;

1. Stop quoting division within Muaūpoko as an excuse for completely disengaging,
2. Proactively communicate with MTA, and other Muaūpoko groups,

3. Remember that Muaūpoko is an iwi made up of hapū, and each hapū has its own mana. (Council relationship with other groups is on the hapū basis, it is unfair to expect the hapū of Muaūpoko to always function as a monolithic block).
4. Remember that division within Muaūpoko has been exacerbated by crown and council policies. This involves giving enough time for Muaūpoko to consult internally,
5. Talk about any issues with Muaūpoko in a spirit of mutuality and shared future, *and*
6. Consider assisting Muaūpoko with capacity building.

Future

The Landfill process is laying the groundwork for a positive shift in relationships. New positivity has the potential to release community initiative and energy. However, it is new, and I recommend ongoing assistance to embed positive dynamics.

Both Ngāti Pareraukawa and Muaūpoko have upcoming Waitangi Tribunal processes, and both have been particularly badly treated by the process so far. These overlapping processes will add pressure to fragile relationships. The challenge will be for the council to maintain positive relationships, and not to revert to 'divide and rule'. I recommend a proactive plan to achieve this. This plan should include a way to pass on internally the knowledge that has been gained through these processes, so hapū don't have to keep re-introducing themselves, and their histories, every three years.