

Taking advantage of synergies

Thank you for the opportunity today to speak to you. I am very pleased to be here talking to you as Minister of Civil Defence and Minister for Senior Citizens.

While these portfolios are separate, many of the issues are inter-related. Like with many other issues faced by society today, there is often an over-lap. Usually, there is no 'one' organisation able to adequately resolve issues in isolation.

I see a great synergy between my portfolios, and this helps me do a better job. I am very keen to make sure that the connections between those working on the same issues are established and strengthened.

I have had a background and keen interest in local government and communities for many years. When I first stood for Parliament, I was Principal Officer of the Hokianga County Council.

And, over the last few decades, I have personally been involved in several community organisations, including my community health committee, Lions Clubs, school committee, and my local rugby club.

Being involved in the community is very satisfying to me both personally and professionally.

We are all aware of the difficulties our communities face today with the continuing rise in crime, drug and alcohol issues, as well as coping with the financial constraints of the current recession.

Local Government in New Zealand has a unique position to influence many areas of life in our local communities.

I appreciate that during these financially worrying times you will have all had to ensure that your councils are delivering good value and excellent service.

I am also aware of the fact that your councils are responsible for many diverse issues, including the public's rising expectation for better services and more specifically, ratepayers' concerns about rising rates and obtaining value for their hard earned dollar.

It can be a difficult task to meet everyone's expectations.

In this environment, I have every confidence that you are exercising fiscal restraint and focussing on core activities. Council decision-making must be clear, transparent and accountable. The benefits of regulation must outweigh the costs.

Central government should look at the impact of costs and burdens of regulation on local government, including the devolution of functions from central to local government.

To achieve this we need to listen to you and concentrate on achieving this.

I am also Chair of the Auckland Regional Governance Committee. I've been in Auckland for the past month listening to ratepayers and councils. Long days have been necessary and travel throughout Auckland to ensure everyone has been able to have their say.

The experience has been invaluable.

There has been a clear and powerful message that Aucklanders want to put the “local” back into local government. This to me will empower local communities.

I can't emphasise enough the importance of listening to the voices of your communities. Local people are the ones on the ground. They know what's happening and will be happy to tell you.

As Minister for Senior Citizens, I am well-supported by an incredibly dynamic bunch of older New Zealanders. Called Volunteer Community Co-ordinators and Positive Ageing Ambassadors, they bring personal knowledge of their communities. This enables them to make a significant contribution to policy development.

The volunteers are a diverse group and from all over New Zealand. They have access to a wide range of local networks, including people from different cultures and backgrounds, from rural and urban areas, community organisations and local government.

The purpose of the Volunteer Community Co-ordinators programme is to promote positive ageing and to inform local and central government about matters affecting older people.

Some of you will know these individuals as they are already working alongside you on 'Councils of Elders' or other positive ageing forums. Going back 10 years or so, there may have only been a few groups.

But with the introduction of the New Zealand Positive Ageing Strategy, local councils have come a long way. I know of at least 30 of these groups working with your local councils, and there are probably a lot more.

I've met with some of these groups and while we may not always agree, I'm always interested to hear what they have to tell me. I strongly recommend that you tap into the wealth of knowledge and experience that is available to you.

At the central government level, we're using the New Zealand Positive Ageing goals to guide us as we consider the best policies for our ageing population.

The over-arching goal of this policy is to create a society where people of all ages have positive attitudes to ageing and older people – that older people will be active participants in improving their quality of life and will experience and enjoy positive ageing.

There are ten positive ageing goals in the strategy. I have identified three priorities that I will champion. The first is promoting the employment of older workers. We need to think about retirement differently and take advantage of the knowledge and experience of older workers.

I also want to promote intergenerational programmes, like 'Grans in schools'. These reinforce the contribution that older people make to their communities and help build positive attitudes about ageing.

Thirdly, I want to raise awareness of elder abuse and neglect prevention. We need to protect the rights and interests of our older people.

I recently launched a new booklet called "Take the Time...Value Older People". This booklet is being produced by Age Concern and the "It's not OK" campaign. This booklet is available for free download from the web, or you can contact my office for help to order copies.

You'll all know the statistics. In the next twenty years, more and more New Zealanders will hit 60 and our older population – currently one in ten over 60 – will likely double by the year 2028.

The challenge for New Zealand Local Government and for all New Zealanders, young and old, will be to continue to find innovative, practical and flexible approaches to maximise their ability to lead independent, positive and satisfying lives at all ages.

Everything that you can do to keep older people ageing positively, living comfortably in their communities, and keeping them contributing for as long as possible, will not just make a huge social difference but it will also help to balance the economic effect of the ageing of the population.

While I'm talking about Senior Citizens, it came to my attention that the opposition are trying to undermine the rights enjoyed by older New Zealanders. The Opposition Finance Spokesperson recently said that he has not "closed the door on re-examining questions of the age of entitlement" to New Zealand Superannuation.

I'd like to state here that this National Government has closed that door.

We are committed to maintaining existing entitlements, and New Zealand Superannuation will continue to be paid from age 65. And as shown in Budget 2009, these settings are affordable and built into long-term spending plans.

As Local Government, you too have an important responsibility. I'm of the view that good local government policies make a huge difference to the quality of older peoples' lives. The older people I have met agree with me.

It's about talking, it's about listening and it's about participating.

It makes good sense to partner up and take advantage of the synergies that are created by diverse groups working together.

Collaborative partnerships strengthen communities and provide opportunities to acknowledge the talents, skills and values of all members of the community. This will ensure that people of all ages can contribute, unrestrained by stereotypes and other barriers.

By developing partnerships with community groups and providing opportunities to contribute in decisions that affect them, Councils can develop strategies and services that are effective and empowering.

Across my portfolios, I think there is an opportunity for Government to engage more with service clubs, church groups and other community organisations. Local communities are an excellent way to get messages out at the local level. I believe that this really helps to shift attitudes and create positive change.

For example, Civil Defence aims to provide for communities and their wellbeing and it is delivered through the local government mechanisms.

We have to get the message through that the best way of coping with an emergency is to be prepared. Not just at a government level – but at an individual, family and community level.

We must encourage people to think about their circumstances and how they might cope in an emergency. We must get them to think about all the skills and resources available in their community and to be prepared to apply them. Ask them the simple questions – What would you take and where would you go?

The national Get Ready Get Thru advertising campaign urges every New Zealander to take steps to be better prepared. I regularly speak with community organisations, such as Grey Power and Age Concern. I put on my Civil Defence hat and talk to them about 'Get Ready Get Thru'.

The campaign is effective, although like many social marketing programmes, it is a slow process to get attitudes to shift. But it is happening.

Several recent events have shown how local communities, local government with civil defence have worked so successfully.

Recently, I visited the Waihi Village which, just last month, was evacuated following a series of earthquakes in the area. The earthquakes resulted in an increased landslide threat to the Village.

I was most impressed with the unity shown by the local Iwi, the Taupo District Council, and the Civil Defence controllers who all supported each other – Working together to ensure emotional and physical hardships were minimised, managed and maintained.

Local authorities are initially responsible for meeting all emergency expenditure arising out of the use of resources and services provided under the direction of a Local (or Group) Controller.

And, the Government will fully reimburse local authorities for eligible costs incurred in caring for displaced people. This includes the full costs of accommodating, transporting, feeding and clothing people who cannot continue to live in their usual place of residence as a result of an emergency.

Following the immediate response phase (usually about three to five days) the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) provides grants to evacuees through its Civil Defence Programme.

These grants cover evacuees' immediate needs such as temporary accommodation, costs, food, clothing and loss of livelihood for those unable to work during the emergency. Payments are not income or asset tested, and MSD can also provide payments to people billeting evacuees.

This is something people are not usually aware of and I was impressed at how smoothly this worked.

Recovery is only one aspect of this nation's civil defence responsibilities. Reducing risk - where possible - is also very important.

A good example where Government and Councils worked together to reduce risk is the recent assistance provided to Environment Bay of Plenty and Whakatane District Council. These Councils jointly requested Government assistance to reduce the impacts of possible future flooding particularly in the urban Edgecumbe area.

I believe the Councils smart thinking about mitigation coupled with the Government's assistance is a practical example of partnership.

In my own area of Northland I visited the recent victims of the tornado. The tornado had moved over Kaitaia causing wind damage to approximately 25 houses and the Kaitaia Hospital.

Damage was largely confined to roofs and windows, including the roof over the Kaitaia Hospital's boiler room and part of its administration building. Although no one was injured in the event, a number of residents self-evacuated from their homes and stayed with family and friends.

In this circumstance the response was mainly managed by the New Zealand Fire Service with approximately 40 fire-fighters coming from Kaitaia, Ahipara, Mangonui and Kerikeri.

They responded to calls for assistance from residents, and helped secure damaged roofs and property. Personnel from Civil Defence, New Zealand Police, and St John also assisted during the response phase.

The Ministry of Social Development staff undertook house to house visits to residents to assess immediate needs and determine any accommodation needs. Victim Support provided emotional support to several people who had been traumatised by the event.

The level of support and interchangeable responsibility is phenomenal in both these cases and imperative to ensure that the damage to people and services is kept to a minimum.

Effective management relies on risk reduction and planning for response and recovery at an individual and organisational level. The initial reaction was swift and efficient.

We must all be aware though that every individual needs to be ready; you may have to be self-reliant for days. I am hoping these recent events will jolt people out of complacency and remember that we all need to be responsible for ourselves.

Emergency Organisations, as we have recently seen, must work together to minimise direct economic and social impacts.

Raising awareness is essential on all levels and this is the message I am delivering all over New Zealand. As Minister for Civil Defence, Minister for Senior Citizens and the Associate Minister for Local Government I'd be interested to hear your ideas. Thank you.