

## MAY 2017 RESEARCH REFLECTION:

### **Creating Closer Communities**

By Brenna Russell

“Strong public awareness and participation in matters relating to mental health and well-being” and “increased community well-being” were two key outcomes outlined in the job description for the Community Connector for Rural Ashburton and Selwyn Districts. A role that I have now filled for just over a year. However, creating opportunities that would meet the needs of two very different districts in terms of both need and lifestyle (both districts have a mix of rural and urban living) was a challenge.

I was handed the opportunity to make this happen in mid-2016, when funding was allocated by the Ministry of Social Development to offer free education around different aspects of Mental Health and wellbeing in the communities that my role covers. The Mental Health Education and Resource Centre (MHERC) would provide these courses and the project was titled “Closer Communities”.

I was given the task of ascertaining what was needed in each community in regards to education around mental health and then, essentially, getting people to show up to the trainings. Immediately, I went into a sort of panic mode, knowing what an enormous task it was going to be, providing education around a topic that is still very much not talked about (especially in rural communities), while also taking into consideration that we would potentially not be able to offer one size fits all courses. The communities would need to take ownership of this project to some extent, if it was to have an impact.

I needed inspiration and guidance as to how to go about this, so I trawled the internet, on the hunt for similar projects and community initiatives. I was very fortunate to stumble upon a piece of research conducted in Auckland, that helped me immensely in utilising the connections I had made during the start of my role to facilitate this initiative.

Link to report here: <https://www.lifewise.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/kyn-evaluation-report.pdf>

The report focuses on the “Know Your Neighbours” community development initiative, which emerged out of community-based research around increasing connectedness in order to enhance feelings of well-being and in doing so create stronger communities that are more resilient. This document outlined the importance of enabling rather than providing. With this in mind, it became apparent that we needed to find out what the communities themselves saw as lacking in regards to mental health education in their areas, rather than just prescribing, what we thought was best in order for them to see it as an opportunity for learning.

From this, we held community consultations in each area (Methven, Ashburton, Darfield and Lincoln). We were interested to see whether common topics came up across the board or if the needs of each area were very different. As it turned out, although there were a few minor differences in perceived as issues in each area, there were also common threads, the most



significant being the need for education around Anxiety and Depression in Youth (which was our first series of events).

Something else that the report outlined was that by enabling community activities, such as localised consultation, planning groups and workshops, it was possible to facilitate stronger community connectedness and social cohesion, while boosting social capital within the community. An example of this possibility becoming a reality is in Methven. The “Anxiety and Depression in Youth” workshop was held at the beginning of November, a week after the 1st anniversary of a youth suicide in that area. Approximately 70 people attended the Methven workshop, mostly parents and teachers. It began a conversation between attendees of the need for more community support around the needs of young people, and from this a few Mum’s are working on starting an informal support group that will be run on Facebook for parents wanting to help each other support their youth.

This report has been useful in my work in many ways. The role of the Community Development Worker in the report has many parallels with my position as the Community Connector. It stresses the importance of building and maintaining strong relationships within the communities in which I am active. I needed to understand the needs of the community to be able to work to provide something, which could truly be of value. It also discusses the lack of clarity around the position in the beginning, and the importance of time in producing tangible outcomes. The report not only made me feel comforted in the progress I had been making, but also shared the vision that working not only for communities, but with communities, was what would bring around increased well-being.