

# Lyttelton's Grassroots Response

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## Background Information

Our small port town of approximately 3000 is tucked into the arms of the Lyttelton Crater. Only 12 kilometres from Christchurch central, it seems miles away from the city with the impressive Port Hills blocking the view of greater Christchurch and the surrounding Canterbury Plains.

We have always been a remote township and as such since European settlement began in 1850, there has been a strong culture of self sufficiency and a very strong culture of community building and community service. With just a quick glace at the local community directory, there are around 30 volunteer organisations within the township alone. These range from service clubs like Rotary and Lions, to school fundraising groups, churches, youth networks, museum societies, emergency response groups, the Lyttelton Information Centre, various environmental initiatives, Volcano Radio and sustainability focused groups like Project Lyttelton.

I was asked to write about our community response to the earthquakes that have continued to rock our area since 4 September 2010. I can write personally about the role of two organisations that I am heavily involved with, the Lyttelton Harbour Information Centre and Project Lyttelton, and can give you a broad overview about the roles that other groups played.

The Lyttelton Information Centre was established in 1996. For many years it mainly focused on the tourism sector and for a large part of its history was part of the formal Christchurch City Council iSite Network. In 2007 we re-formed as an independent community run information centre with a focus on being the hub of quality information for residents and visitors. We wanted to broaden our relevance to the wider community. With that decision we invited Project Lyttelton's Timebank to share the office space with us in 2009, and the two organisations worked very closely together.

The synergies were interesting. The Information Centre was the place for new residents to visit and find their

way in Lyttelton and discover community activities. Lyttelton Timebank was the conduit for "settled" residents to have a need to visit the information centre. From 2009 we were actively strengthening each others networks and helping to shape a more connected community.

Project Lyttelton was established in Lyttelton in 1994, originally to be a conduit for the Main Street Programme. It broadened to focus on historical preservation and, when Margaret Jeffries became the chair in 2003, broadened further to focus more on community development and sustainability. Project Lyttelton gave people in the community the permission to "create whatever they wanted", as long as it supported the mission statement: "Portal to Canterbury's historic past, a vibrant sustainable community creating a living future". Some of the initiatives that have been created since 2003 include the Lyttelton Farmers Market, Lyttelton Timebank, Lyttelton Harbour Festival of Lights, and the Lyttelton Harbour Food Security Project.

## What is timebanking?

Timebanking is a way of trading skills in a community. It uses time, rather than money, as the measurement tool. Everyone's time is equal. Members of a time bank share their skills with other members within the community and are given time credits for the work they do. With the credits they gain, each member can 'buy' someone else's time, and get the service they need. Membership is open to all residents and community groups in the area. Generally membership is granted on application. Transactions are facilitated by a broker and transactions are recorded on a computerised system. This builds up a great resource of skills and a great information network.

Timebanking is a great way to build your community. People meet one another via trades who would never have met otherwise. They get to know one another and so the circle they know gets bigger and friendships develop. People experience the compassionate side of humans and this just helps them feel part of the community.

A timebank is such a flexible tool. Its use is only limited by the imaginations of the people who trade and the people who co-ordinate it. At the time of the major earthquakes Jules Lee was our co-ordinator. Currently the Lyttelton Timebank has 435 members from the nearby communities.

Some highlights of a timebank that exist in normal times but are significant in times of disaster, include:

- You know the many skills you have available in the community because timebank members list them on the timebank database.
- You have rapid ways of accessing the members information via the extensive database.
- You can send information quickly to large groups of people as the system has a messaging system to contact all members.
- You know who the key people in the community are because the co-ordinator is tasked with linking with all the relevant groups.
- People are already practiced in using such a connecting system – so it kicks in fast.
- There is a strong human element. This builds a sense of community where compassion and love become the norm.
- It allows all people to be involved.
- Above all, it creates hope.



**Members of Lyttelton's Volunteer Fire Brigade fixing one of the chimneys damaged during the September 2010 earthquake**

## Earthquake specific responses

Several groups in Lyttelton have played a key role in our earthquake responses, and it is interesting to note that different responses have occurred after each major event.

For example, for the 4 September 2010 earthquake the key organisations involved in the community response were:

- Lyttelton Volunteer Fire Brigade
- Lyttelton St John
- Lyttelton Police
- Lyttelton Information Centre
- Lyttelton Timebank
- Lyttelton Health Centre
- Volcano Radio.

Immediately after the earthquake our Volunteer Fire Brigade, St John's and the Police got to work helping people with damaged property. This included fixing chimneys, hot water services, boarding windows, cordoning off buildings etc. The commitment from these mostly volunteer people was amazing. As our Fire Chief, Mark Buckley, acknowledges skills and knowledge have been passed down from fire chief to fire chief. The Volunteer Fire Brigade know where fuel supplies are, how to source water, and where to locate generators. Together the fire fighters and their volunteer team, including their family and friends, have such great skills. Some are builders and engineers who can help with advice on building issues. Our brigade and family members are like most of our volunteer groups, very versatile, multi-skilled and talented. These guys worked all weekend helping people alongside the Police and St John.

The wider community didn't realise that Civil Defence Lyttelton was not called into local service but was directed into central Christchurch. It wasn't until two days after the earthquake on Monday morning that the Lyttelton Timebank and the Information Centre realised there was no community hub for a response. At that point we swung into action.

The Information Centre



### Army truck coming up Canterbury Street

was perfect as a drop in point and both organisations gained significantly from all the new people that came in volunteering their services or those that needed help. The Health Centre used timebankers to phone the elderly to ensure they were okay. The Volunteer Fire Brigade requested help taking down simple chimneys and other smaller jobs. The Timebank and the Information Centre became the central point for all these activities to be facilitated, plus becoming the perfect drop in point for locals who needed a place to be.

In September, some of the lessons we learned were:

- Do not assume someone else is going to step in when an emergency happens. Community groups, except for emergency services, did not respond immediately. We thought civil defence would have everything under control and that the City Council's Ready Net, a new information management system that stores and shares emergency information, would kick in letting us know what to do. This did not happen.
- You need multiple community emergency hubs because you never know what buildings are going to be available. The Information Centre became the de-facto hub of the community response. Council owned buildings remained closed. The local civil defence sector post was not opened as those

volunteers were sent to central Christchurch.

- In earthquakes all communities have civil defence needs. The local civil defence team was needed, and the community needed access to the civil defence hub.
- We needed more robust information networks. The Timebank had the most comprehensive list so it also became the principal information source. At this stage Lyttelton Main School didn't have email contact lists. The Information Centre had contact lists but mainly for its wider tourism community. Information supply was quite disjointed. We were lucky that we also had our volunteer operated radio station, Volcano Radio, to add another level of back up and they were able to broadcast updates to the general harbour community as well.
- All community groups needed to network even more.

In the 22 February 2011 earthquake, the key groups to the earthquake response were:

- Lyttelton Volunteer Fire Brigade
- Lyttelton St John
- Lyttelton Police
- Lyttelton Civil Defence
- Local employees of Christchurch City Council who took on a civil defence role
- Lyttelton Timebank
- Lyttelton Health Centre
- Lyttelton Community House
- Volcano Radio
- plus, outside groups, the New Zealand Navy and Army.

Initially, the formal response to this earthquake came from our civil defence team, the Army, Navy, Police, St John and the Lyttelton Volunteer Fire Brigade. The Lyttelton Timebank was working alongside these guys in an unofficial capacity. As in the September earthquake, these agencies took the lead role in making the town safe and ensuring we had water, food and shelter.

Three days into the emergency the usefulness of the Timebank was recognised by the wider team, and the Timebank was invited to be part of the daily emergency briefing system.

Whilst civil defence and the other organisations have specific roles, there are lots of community related jobs that need to be done to make the overall response to the emergency run better. Some of this work was done by the Timebank, Volcano Radio and Lyttelton Community House.



#### Julie Lee hard at it as team leader at the first point of contact at the Lyttelton Recreation Centre

Our Timebank coordinator would later refer to this as 'a hole' or 'a gap' in the emergency process.

Key things that the Timebank was able to facilitate while working in partnership with the other agencies were:

- Finding local accommodation for people. They were able to do this by putting messages on the Timebank network, and helping civil defence by registering people who came into the Civil Defence Centre offering accommodation.
- Directing tradespeople to homes that needed emergency repairs. Residents just popped down to the emergency centre or phoned and left the details of what help they needed. This saved stressed residents having to try and find tradespeople and relieved the work load on the Volunteer Fire Brigade. For example, in my home they directed the Navy to board up a window, and organised a tradesman to fix the hot water cylinders for all houses within the body corporate complex that I live in. Timebank worked closely with the Volunteer Fire Brigade and Fletcher's Hub (hubs were set up around the city as places residents could visit to discuss repairs

and rebuilding) during this period. These were an excellent source of communication. Safety was paramount and some repairs (e.g. chimneys) required the go ahead by the Volunteer Fire Brigade.

- They could source people immediately for various tasks. Kathy Bessant got her team at Community House together to ensure the elderly were being looked after and in particular, fed
- They got the information desk up and running.
- Timebank coordinator Julie Lee (Jules) produced information broadcasts on the Timebank email network, sometimes four days a day. Plus she updated the information white board on the footpath for those that didn't have power or computers. The information that was shared came from the emergency meetings she attended, so was very reliable and up to date. I don't know who would have done this if the Timebank hadn't picked up this task.
- Jules also helped civil defence volunteers source extra helpers for people who were trying to evacuate. There was a lot of furniture and belongings to move.

- Whilst civil defence got the water tankers, Jules and her team organised a roster for the water tankers, plus ensured the volunteers had shade and food.
- The Timebank helped put a local face on the emergency effort. Many outsiders have no idea who the right contacts are.
- They helped co-ordinate donated supplies.
- Helped co-ordinate the myriad of volunteers who registered at the recreation centre.
- Helped facilitate food for volunteers. Initially this was coordinated by the Navy, and then local people started baking and sustaining the volunteers. This was particularly appreciated by the Police and Volunteer Fire Brigade.
- Some of the Timebank responses were totally unorganised. People really want to contribute as life goes on in the midst of a crisis. A group of timebankers – not trading, just living the ethos of time banking made hand stitched heart brooches. Hundreds of these hearts have been made. Ministers of the Crown, sports celebrities, Lyttelton people and crumbled Lyttelton buildings all wore the hearts visibly. This was our community's outward sign of love and support to one another.

In a nutshell, our Timebank coordinator was able to easily identify the 'gaps' and 'holes' as they arose, and was quickly able to fill these. She was able to do this because of her extensive grassroots work with the community. The Timebank knew the community.

It should be noted that during this period the Timebank was working with members and non-members. Most of the trades during this period were not recorded. Our Timebank Coordinator had a natural flair for organising in a crisis, and her work with the Timebank gave her the unique opportunity to play a significant role in the emergency response.

Another group that had a significant impact on the community response was Community House. This team of people have generally supported the elderly and disadvantaged, and they run the local youth centre.

Key things Community House was able to facilitate:

- Our elderly and vulnerable people were able to be cared for. As a result of the September earthquake, the Health Centre and a local club for elderly, called the Hibiscus Club, were able to identify all at risk elderly quickly and began cooking evening meals five days a week for 42 people. This service continues to this day, however, only 25 people are looked

after now. This programme ensured our vulnerable residents had good food and a visitor every day. This meant no elderly were forgotten. We truly have a community that cares for everyone.

- The volunteer cooking team were hospitality staff who had been displaced from local restaurants. They chose to use their skill to help our older people.
- Local teachers were looking for a place for youth to get some sort of structure. Community House is also a youth centre. Community House became available to qualified and non-qualified teachers who had skills that teenagers might be interested in. For a week Portside High operated from Community House. Feedback from students was great. For example, some students got song writing lessons from local musicians. This had a profound effect on some young people.

#### Volcano Radio

- Once again this organisation was able to play a great support role informing the wider community of the situation.
- They were also able to organise an impromptu concert on the day the township was supposed to have its Summer Street Party. This was so therapeutic on Saturday, 26 February 2011.
- Our Timebank coordinator would ring the radio station and they would air out urgent requests immediately. Our Timebank coordinator described a local community radio station as a fantastic source of communication.

#### Lessons learned:

- Authorities have to trust local initiatives. We can really compliment the emergency and recovery effort.
- Authorities should respect community groups more. They can unlock a community for them. No one knows a community better than the people that work and play within it. Talk with them first. Find out what is going on prior to deciding what they think is best. There was a lot of doubling up because authorities decided not to communicate.
- Often the volunteers are more skilled than the experts. The Volunteer Fire Brigade highlighted this. Many of their volunteers were multi-skilled and so they could perform multiple functions, not just fire related.
- Volunteers have a vested interest in their special place. They will go that extra mile. It's not just a job.

- Volunteers can be coordinated within the various community groups and the main emergency team. Our community showed that clearly. The main thing is to make it clear what the needs are, and then let people get on with it.
- Local knowledge makes the emergency phase much easier.
- Our local community information systems needed to be wider. The Information Centre now produces a weekly newsletter called the Lyttelton Review. This gives updated council, community and Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority news that is specific to our area. We have over 800 people on the database, but we know the reach is much greater as many people forward it on.
- A community radio station is really important especially for people who do not have the Internet.
- Communities really benefit from organisations that exist to build communities all the time rather than those that exist for a narrow purpose (like civil defence). It is easier to get people involved in something dynamic rather than fairly static. The Volunteer Fire Brigade, Timebank, Information Centre, Volcano Radio, Community House and St John's are good examples of this.
- Community information centres and timebanks work really well together and should be encouraged to link all over the country. They could also form a new link to civil defence and emergency networks, broadening the skills and information base.
- Community initiatives can create spontaneous initiatives to solve problems, and at the same time

- give people a role and create hope. It might be the local coffee shop opening a coffee tent or the heart stitchers creating a talking point, or Volcano Radio getting local musicians together to create a spontaneous concert.
- Lyttelton's community response should inspire you. In particular, city councils need to help create community resilience everywhere because the benefits of a grassroots response to coping in a crisis and then moving forward are huge. You must invest in your people, and enable your volunteer groups to flourish. It's a bit like preventative health. Don't wait for the "heart attack", be proactive. The majority of our community are now taking responsibility to shape the future of our town, and it excites most of us and gives us great hope for the future.
  - We know we have a fantastic community that really cares for each other, because that's the sort of community we have been striving to make. All communities have this potential, they might just need a bit of help to get there.

At one of the emergency briefings City Councillor and Local Community Board Member, Claudia Reid, was heard to say: "This is emergency heaven in Lyttelton".

I believe she said this because the collaboration of all the groups had reached a new level. Both the official and unofficial responses to the emergency had created this new teamwork, and together Lyttelton was acting as a cooperative collective producing a more holistic response for all residents in our emergency situation.