

Supporting Canterbury Men in Post Covid Times

By Donald Pettitt, Chief Executive Officer, Canterbury Men's Centre, October 2020

The aim of this paper

The Canterbury Men's Centre has the aim of *Happy Healthy Canterbury Men*. We rely on community feedback as well as the needs and feedback from the men that use our service to establish priorities for accomplishing this. This paper draws on the feedback from our stakeholders in a recent email to stakeholders.

At the time of this feedback, the world is wrestling with the first pandemic in a century. New Zealand – Aotearoa has been fortunate enough to keep the disease out of the general population but at some cost to community wellbeing.

In the case of Canterbury, this is tragedy is the fourth in a series that has affected us. The many earthquakes a decade ago that affected Canterbury are still echoing as memories and legacy impacts. The shootings and related deaths at the mosques are still unravelling, with the trial of the perpetrator having just been completed. The port hills fire also had a significant effect on many in Christchurch.

"Essentially, how to 'be a man' in the modern context".

Christchurch and Canterbury

There is a tendency for projects that operate in a city to neglect the experience of those outside that city. We were pleased to find 8 of the 23 responses to our survey came from regional Canterbury and as such highlight it.

The data supplied by those 8 respondents more acutely pointed to a need for accessibility of various kinds. Support services, counselling, and leisure groups/projects that were male in focus. This didn't emerge with the pandemic but has been worsened by it.

What are the current challenges for men/ your male clients?

The body of combined comments refers to the issues found in previous consultations into men's needs. They fell into the following categories:

1. Support at time of separation, job loss, with this being worsened by the pandemic.
2. Social isolation, lack of opportunity for meaningful engagement with peers, with this being worsened by the pandemic.
3. Anxiety and mental health matters in general, with these again being seen as worsening due to the pandemic.
4. Access to services, including government services with that being a matter of accessible hours, cost, awareness by the men, and mental health services. Again, worsening due to the pandemic.

5. Accommodation, especially in the case of single men.

What should exist to improve things for men? How should that response be done?

Compassion, empathy, somehow creating a situation where a man knows it is okay to ask for help and he won't be judged weak.

Significant focus by the respondents was on having an informal feel to whatever support is provided. That might be counselling, groups, and mental health interventions. This may have been driven by a fear that too formal structures can send the signal of "power over" instead of partnership in focus.

Groups of whatever kind were much more highlighted in the feedback than in previous data. Tangible genuine points of connection. The suggestion was to highlight existing groups and create new relevant groups. Men's Sheds were mentioned several times as an effective model.

Access and awareness of services was a core theme. A lack of services was also pointed to more than previously, with this being at least partly driven by greater feedback from outside Christchurch. Mental health service support especially was noted as a need to be fulfilled.

Systemic change was much more likely to be the focus this time compared with earlier feedback.

1. Family court
2. General government/ funding support for men's wellbeing projects
3. A Ministry of Men's Affairs

Projects suggested by respondents were:

1. Job readiness and placement services for men
2. Advocacy to improve the performance of the IRD regarding child support
3. Having Work and Income and other government agencies such as IRD make after hours appointments available for working men.
4. Group opportunities to learn about managing business and legal challenges
5. Much more significant promotion of services relevant to men, with that being in traditional as well as social media.

6. Men's sheds again being seen as a particularly attractive model.
 7. Groups for anything from book clubs to legal advice.
 8. Coaching in health services.
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Analysis:

We do this research with the aim of getting advice from stakeholders as to what they and their men need from us to improve outcomes for men.

The responses we had were only minimally focused on these remarkable times of pandemic.

The most difficult challenges for the CMC to respond to as a group were the systemic issues hampering men's wellbeing and the social isolation issues. Effecting change in national policy is hard. Altering the engagement by government agencies in relationship to men's issues is again overwhelming, especially since our current and arguably successful focus has been on service provision and health literacy (The Blokes Book).

The other main challenge presented, overcoming the great malaise of this age, social isolation, is also such a large challenge with no easy solution. While a number of respondents pointed to men's sheds and men's groups as solutions these have only had a small impact so far on the larger challenge of male social isolation.

The community development support we gave for **men's sheds** in Canterbury were a remarkably rewarding project for us in our early years. The 30 shed groups that have formed since the earthquakes are remarkable given they are all independently created and operated by volunteers. Having said that, when you look at the numbers cared for, this is not on the scale that needs to be achieved to really turn things around.

Canterbury, outside of Christchurch, is hungry for more access to services. How the CMC addresses this is a larger question to be explored.

The Low Hanging Fruit

Informing men and those that care about them about solutions inside existing services is the most relevant approach given the feedback supplied.

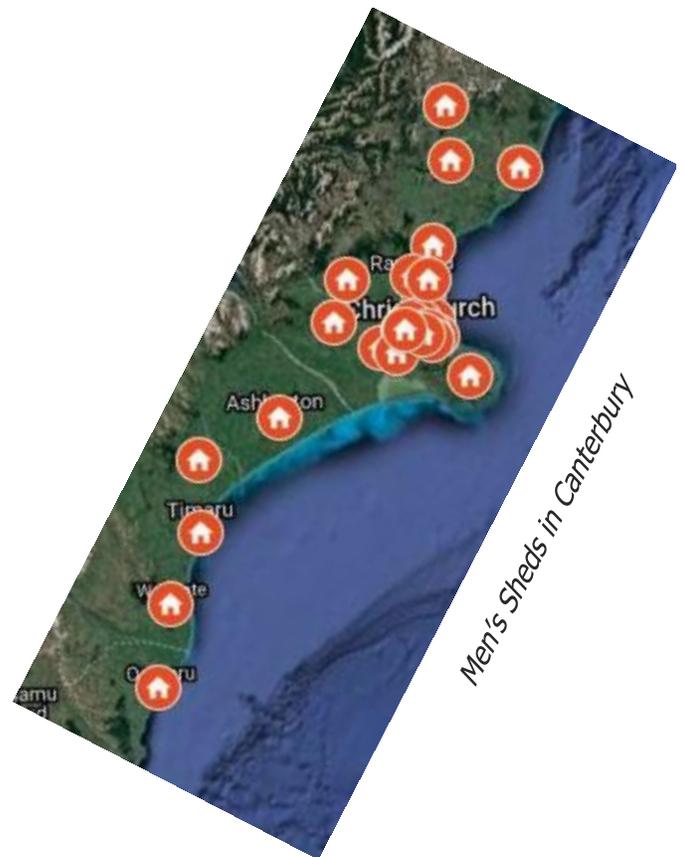
There are existing service solutions that men (and referrers) aren't aware of, with the CMC being one significant solution. The following are a few of the quotes demonstrating this.

Access support inside of work hours. Financial hardship and to pay for counselling/therapy.

A greater range of free and readily accessible support systems. Also more publicity for the available services and where to access them. Cost can often be a barrier to many trying to access supports plus there is often a waiting time to get help especially in critical times.

coordinated non-govt service for job readiness and placement

services for men by men



There needs to be services that go to the home and help address their mental ill-health and support them to access their community. These services need to be more accessible - those currently in place are limited by funding, waitlists and office based delivery.

Encouraging men to connect with their local G.P to see if they have a Health Coach on board if not, find out where one is located.

There is some ignorance of existing services by referrers and by male clients that could address many of the issues. Arguably it is time for the CMC to shift some of its focus from service provision to ensuring healthy literacy in and about men is raised.

There are arguably many low cost opportunities to reduce social isolation on the community.

There were many comments about the need for men to meet and find comfort as well as advice from others.

having opportunities to meet, advertising the opportunities

men who are suffering significantly with anxiety and as such, as living in total isolation and do not leave their homes. They are unhappy with their lives, however are unable to make significant changes to their lives. It is difficult to socialize these gentlemen as their anxiety prohibits them leaving the house.

Lack of opportunities to meaningfully connect with their peers.

Loneliness, isolation and relationships

Social connections

Groups help reduce isolation and enable men to know they are not alone and there are resources available

A review of any community database finds that there are a near infinite number of volunteer projects, hobby groups, and educational opportunities available. Internet search tools allow people to find even the most specific idiosyncratic hobby or form a group to support one.

This begs the question of why people are experiencing such powerlessness in addressing their social isolation. Causes that come to mind include:

1. The lack of the culture of engaging in new interests by those individuals

2. Social anxiety
3. There being a lack of significant reward for those pursuing a new hobby
4. That social isolation, while a killer, kills the capacity of those that are enduring it to overcome it. Hunger inspires eating. In this case, the hunger for reduced social isolation doesn't inspire the action required to fix it.
5. That those opportunities have significant barriers that outwardly aren't obvious

Recommendations

Find out what would be useful to men in broader Canterbury and take some action. The CMC CEO already has plans to visit Mid and South Canterbury to explore this question. North Canterbury would be a later project.

The CMC should take on a project of heightening awareness of support service options for men. We currently do minimal work toward this matter beyond rolling out The Blokes Books.

This could include the following:

1. Promotion in standard media (expensive but there are free/lower cost ways to do this as well)
2. Promotion in on line media (expensive if done with ads, but maybe effective with targeting and there are also free ways to do this).
3. Continue with Blokes Books, but do a more significant push into the community sector, the health sector, and the general community.
4. Use the CMC E-news (Male Call) to run a monthly breakdown/discussion of where health and community workers should refer men. This allows for us to form a better understanding of such pathways but also it enables people to build that knowledge when they do engage men.
5. Keep the data in item 4 accessible on our website.

A shift from 5% of our effort currently being put into this to 15% might be very wise. Getting men to existing services more proficiently doesn't require new systems to be set up nor more funding raised by us. It also might also go some way to heightening awareness of the other issues men deal with, and allow us the to build some momentum and credibility toward systemic changes.

The CMC should find out what is the issue with social isolation and men; then fix it.

Research, and a review of the existing research is needed in this case. But that should not delay us in implementing project(s) but instead be used as a platform for us to develop from.

A previous model by us was the *Fun for Older Men* Project. This was a google map of fun things for older men as well as a related booklet that was highly recommended as a project in research, but as a project it seemed to lack the right champion. It was nobodies job, beyond the CMC, to see that men found it. Whereas, in contrast, The Blokes Book has so many champions.

Would a project just focused on telling men about their options for a reduction in social isolation be enough to make a difference? This is unlikely at first glance as the threshold currently is so low. Whatever project emerges, we want it to be one that has enduring impact on improving Canterbury society.

As an agency we are aiming for large social change. Our support services now operate at a scale that over a lengthy period would directly support a third of men in Canterbury at some point. The Blokes Book has now been printed and distributed almost 200,000 times, with this being equivalent to the adult male population of Canterbury.

Conclusions:

Engage directly with stakeholders in Mid and South Canterbury and see what we can do as a result of this exploration.

Focus in the immediate term on putting men's services in the public eye more. Make it easier for health and community services that reach men to take care of them. This will likely involve an engagement campaign built around The Blokes Book and our e-news (Male Call).

Explore and come up with solutions for male social isolation. This could be a five-year project, though we can't be that patient.

Thanks!

Thanks to the 23 respondents to our survey. We hope your comments were honored at least partly in our above analysis and recommendations.

Thanks to the many people that have helped the CMC achieve quite a bit so far. It has been 12 years in the making and so many community groups, the health system, civil servants and just random kiwis that all want to be part of our aim to develop *Happy Healthy Canterbury Men*.

And thanks to our funders. So many different funding groups have seen us as being a solution to the many pressing challenges Canterbury faces. We feel honoured, encouraged and recognized by that on-going support.

Appendix: Questionnaire Data

This simple questionnaire was sent out via our September e-news (Male Call), using google forms to gather the information below. The bulk of those replying are directly involved in the caring professions. A few are responding from the workplace setting of a business. Data has been removed to increase confidentiality.

What are the current challenges for men/ your male clients? Mention Covid-19 related things here too.

Access support inside of work hours. Financial hardship and to pay for counselling/therapy. Change of role for some which has mean a sense of identity loss.

Accommodation for single men.

Affording/accessing a lawyer esp. if having been served with papers regarding separation (children) or family violence. Also a lot of men still don't seem to come forward when victims of family violence themselves.

Anxiety, unemployment, addictions

As a retired male my main challenge is my poor hearing and having to use hearing aids.

Being relevant to family especially after separation/divorce; being authentic; loneliness, anxiety over Covid - money, work

Booking in to see a G.P i.e. wait times, costs of attending one, lack of Specialist Mental Health Services support in the community

Challenges on time to maintain the necessities of life

having opportunities to meet, advertising the opportunities.

I am working with a number of men who are suffering significantly with anxiety and as such, as living in total isolation and do not leave their homes. They are unhappy with their lives, however are unable to make significant changes to their lives. It is difficult to socialize these gentlemen as their anxiety prohibits them leaving the house.

I feel men are looking after their families and maybe don't know how to talk about their problems and fears

Increased violence and family harm, high suicide statistics, addictions, anxiety about COVID impacts

In-Work challenges around the increasingly casualised workplace leading to variable and insecure incomes, increasing underemployment and inability of Statutory agencies, particularly IRD and NZ Work and Income to respond by providing accessible services that cater for quick changes to income in a timely manner. Child support calculations are slow, inaccurate and damaging creating crippling child support arrears, penalties and interest. Inequity of access to legal support and treatment by the family court creates a problem (mainly for dads) who run up massive legal bills when facing a system where (Often Mum) has legal aid and has a lot to gain, including forcing her ex to incur further debt (legal fees) by procrastinating or resorting to endless litigation. In another context this would meet the threshold of being domestic Violence - psychological and financial abuse. Often we find that the men are horribly in debt and are not able to see their children because the Ex. simply denied them access with impunity as the only enforcement available would incur further legal fees.

Job loss/Income pressures

Lack of opportunities to meaningfully connect with their peers.

Loneliness, isolation and relationships

Male specific health matters, lack of bins in male public toilet cubicles to dispose of urinary incontinence pads

Separation, marriage breakup. Finding someone to talk with who is practical and down to earth. Money issues. Partner expectations.

Social connections, Access to counseling, Inability to control how our lives are being affected by Covid.

The dominance of the male survivors of sexual abuse by one unwell individual.

Unable to make plans, concerns about work, finances, mortgage

"We see a lot of men struggling to maintain their healthy masculinity & naturally male characteristics, without being labelled as 'toxic', or suppressing their behaviour in the belief that to be masculine is to act inappropriately.

Essentially, how to 'be a man' in the modern context. "

What should exist to improve things for men? How should that response be done?

A change in mindset that men have doubts, fears etc the same as women. They just express them differently or don't express them at all.

A greater range of free and readily accessible support systems. Also more publicity for the available services and where to access them. Cost can often be a barrier to many trying to access supports plus there is often a waiting time to get help especially in critical times.

A Ministry of Mens affairs

Can we coordinate available spaces and co share facilities

Coaching on how to manage the situation

Compassion, empathy, somehow creating a situation where a man knows it is okay to ask for help and he won't be judged weak. There is a lot of bias around family violence (e.g. the man is never the victim). I imagine non-cisgender men are particularly at risk. We do see some through the firm, but not enough (statistically speaking we should be seeing a lot more LGBTQ+). I don't think we have any reputational issues that would keep people from approaching us, I think that they are just not seeking help from a lawyer.

coordinated non-govt service for job readiness and placement

Groups help reduce isolation and enable men to know they are not alone and there are resources available

Having sessions that are not ""counselling" even if they are. Small group "chats" to get advice and be heard. Sessions that are fact based re separation and the law, sessions for money issues, small business failure, bankruptcy. wills and trusts, factual information prior to " going " to the lawyer. Medical issues heart, prostate, cancer. Advertise these through radio talk back, local papers, social media. Leaflet drop, men's sheds, local groups. Blokes talking to blokes with factual and useful information being shared and issues being discussed. An upmarket version (with factual information) of talking at the pub.

I don't see any problems/improvements than for any other retired person - male or female

I think support that you guys provide is great. Simply having discussions with men themselves is really important, either addressing concerns/problem areas, or creating a culture (menz shed does this great) where men can spend time together and not be afraid to connect with one another.

Increase in accommodation for single men so they can afford to live better.

More robust Specialist Mental Health Services readily available, also more affordable access to therapy.

More services. Also more groups with a focus on practical tasks, the men's sheds have been successful but wonder about groups for those 25-50. Could be something practical and a way for them to connect.

Need small social group activities that facilitate deeper discussions. Things like book groups or ideas/learning - based initiatives could be good. Need to encourage men to feel confident about participating in more 'feminine' pursuits.

Promotion of what is available, Financial support for groups that support mens activities like Men's Sheds and Service clubs.

services for men by men, well funded and supportive; education for boys on positive self image

"Submission to IRD (CBS Can Support) to expedite the automatic adjustments to Child Support liabilities promptly based on regular payday filing returns.

Work and income accessibility and timely appointments that are realistic for men who are In-Work.

Family court enforcement of access arrangements without Fathers having to incur further legal fees to no avail as there is no consequence for blocking access. Consequences for blocking access to children including moving to unknown addresses or to addresses where access is impossible - After all we are dealing with court orders! This is as much about children's right to know their father as it is about Father's right and responsibility to be a parent. "

There needs to be services that go to the home and help address their mental ill-health and support them to access their community. These services need to be more accessible - those currently in place are limited by funding, waitlists and office based delivery.

To have disposal bins available in a few labelled public toilet cubicles

Any other comment you would like to make?

Again, the work going on is great. It's much needed, and is making real changes in men's lives.

appreciate your counselling service, many are being helped

As always, we are more than happy to help with education or training or being a safe place for people to come to if they need help. Thank you for the work you do. I'm keen to see the results of this survey and see where it takes the community.

Encouraging men to connect with their local G.P to see if they have a Health Coach on board if not, find out where one is located.

It appears to me that the considerable ground that was gained after the men's action criticizing the biases in the Family Court have been eroded (radicalized) over the years. Maybe it is time for another shakeup!

It is very very difficult to survive on a single benefit. This affects men more than women .

Keep up the good work.

Men have as much to contribute to our communities as others but it feels that ladies have greater support available to them, particularly in the area of mental health support.

Men are dreadful at finding out the facts about things that are troubling them and even more dreadful at paying for sound advice, until it is almost too late.

Men are losing the battle for equality.

No

Very important to have a drop in service and also look after staff and contractors and keep them informed

Would be great to see more male clinicians to support the need in the community.