

February 2021

LIFEWISE

Learning from the street:

Merge Community

Riporipo kau ana, ka pōkarekare te wai.

*The whirlpool we create, causes ripples.
Our experiences influence others.*

- Whakatauki by Ken Kerehoma, Pou Manukura, Lifewise

Ngā mihi nui

Aroha and gratitude to all who contributed to this story and to all those who are part of Merge Community, from the past to the present. Special thanks and gratitude to J R McKenzie Trust, who have believed in us and been our main funder since 2018.

There are so many who have contributed to the foundations and spirit of Merge Community.

Special thanks to our peer support volunteers, Merge Café, our Lifewise team and to past Lifewise anchors of Merge Community. You know who you are, you are in our hearts, you have touched us and left your imprint and wisdom in Merge.

This story was authored by Rachael Trotman (www.weavingchange.nz), by reviewing Merge documentation and talking with peer support volunteers and Lifewise staff. Thanks to Lisa Kane from Mind and Body (www.mindandbody.co.nz) for facilitating discussion with peer support volunteers. While this is not a formal evaluation of Merge Community, it is evidence informed.

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Our kaupapa

Merge Community is a taonga grown from the street whānau of Auckland's inner city. Street whānau refers to people who are rough sleeping, homeless or 'vulnerably housed', such as those in emergency housing, overcrowded homes or boarding houses. It includes those at risk of becoming homeless such as prison leavers and those with past experience of homelessness.

Here we share our Merge Community story so far, including our kaupapa, approach, successes and challenges, and our learning about what it takes to support street whānau and tackle homelessness.



"Merge Community is a doorway for people experiencing homelessness, addictions and mental health issues, to be heard and supported. Our focus is the wellbeing of street whānau in Auckland's inner city¹."

"It's about doing things with people, rather than to them."

We grow hope, wellness and self-determination with street whānau in Auckland's inner city through:

- a peer support approach – people with lived experience helping others
- earning and development through enterprise
- building relationships and community
- raising the voices of lived experience of homelessness.

Lived experience and peer support are core to our approach. Lived experience refers to the knowledge, wisdom and expertise that comes from experiencing major life challenges. Peer support occurs when people are trained and supported to use their lived experience to guide others on their journey.

Our mahi continues once people are housed:

"Housed whānau are still out there [on the streets], we need to open up opportunities for work and things to do."

When asked what comes to mind when they think of
Merge Community, our peer support team said:

People, **ngā tāngata**

Homelessness, relationships

Rangatiratanga, **self-determination**

Personal redemption and contribution

Whanaungatanga

Struggle, **breaking barriers**, challenges

Caring, aroha, **love**

Being able to help somebody

The games people play

Giving back

Merge Community

Merge Community is part of Lifewise Trust. It is a community-centred initiative focused on Auckland’s inner city rough sleeping community. Merge is a doorway for people to access support and housing within Lifewise, community and various agencies. More importantly, it is a doorway for people to create their own solutions.

Merge Community is a web with many strands. At its centre are our peer support volunteers, the street whānau who take part in our activities and a small Lifewise staff team. Our peer support volunteers and three quarters of our staff have lived experience of homelessness, mental distress and/or addiction.

Peer support volunteer numbers ebb and flow, with 10 volunteers over 2020 and a core group of six. Our staff includes two part time Peer Outreach² staff who connect with street whānau on the streets; two full time Peer Navigators who support people in emergency housing into secure housing; two full time and two part-time Merge Community staff. A volunteer literacy coordinator joined the team in late 2019.

*** See Appendix One for our current theory of change.



3 Peer Outreach staff were funded by Auckland Council for two years from 2020. The Ministry of Social Development funds our Peer Navigators.

Beginnings 2008-2017



In 2008, Lifewise evaluated its Soup Kitchen on Karangahape Road and in 2010 turned it into a social enterprise called Merge Café, with a community hub and housing crisis space upstairs. This marked a shift by Lifewise from a charity model (doing for) to an empowerment approach (doing with), that is evidence-informed. This major shift sowed the seeds of Merge Community, followed by these milestones.

2015

Lifewise establishes supported housing for young homeless people. Lifewise partners with Auckland Council, Auckland City Mission and Thinkplace on a report on the experience of rough sleepers in central Auckland.

2016

Lifewise begins the 'Peer to Peer Project', a co-designed peer support group based at Merge Café, shaped by people with lived experience of homelessness. Four of these people begin to co-design Housing First in Auckland with Lifewise, involving large numbers of the street community.

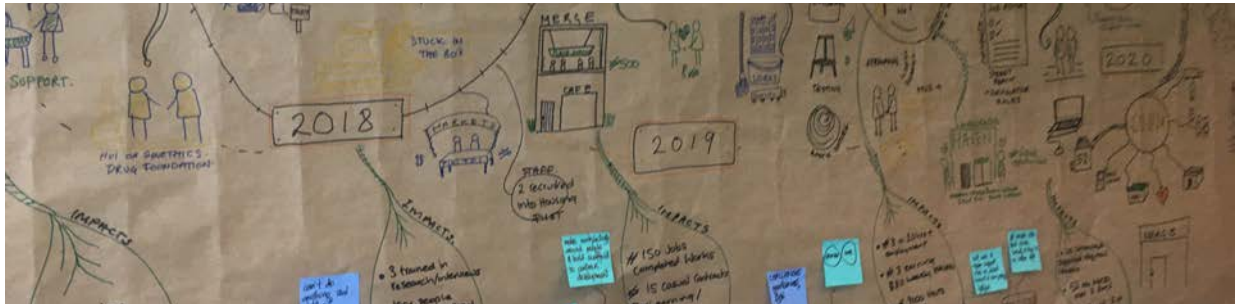
2017

Lifewise partners with Auckland City Mission to implement Housing First in Auckland, which is co-designed and delivered by people with lived experience of homelessness. Auckland Council partners with Lifewise on Inside the Cup, to understand the experiences of people who hustle in the Auckland City centre. Lifewise partners with The Southern Initiative on the TROW project, to support people with lived experience of homelessness into jobs in the civil construction industry. Lifewise partners with the Sisters of Mercy and Auckland City Mission on Te Miringa Project to produce Mana Wahine, to better understand women's experiences of homelessness.

Dec 2017

Merge Community gains three-year funding from J R McKenzie Trust. Lifewise also invests and several other funders provide small grants for training, projects and volunteer expenses. Lifewise develops a strategy to embed peer support and lived experience across all of its services.

Merge Community Journey 2018 to 2020



Storming, forming and learning

- 2018
 - Community co-design processes create social enterprise ideas to test
 - 'Piki Toi' begins – a vehicle for street whānau to make and sell art
 - Input into policy via Synthetics Hui
 - Peer support team moves into the space above Merge Café (October)
 - Three peer support volunteers in June; by December, 14 mainly Māori peer support volunteers are trained, and two gain paid employment as peer support workers at Housing First
 - 2019
 - Social enterprise 'Lifewise Works' is piloted
 - Creative space 'Te Whare' prototyped
 - Eight regular peer support volunteers
 - 'Stuck in the 80s' campaign to raise benefit abatement levels
 - Learning from Te Whare is captured
 - 'Street' book shares the stories of seven street whānau
 - Contract for new Peer Navigators and Outreach team (December)
 - New literacy volunteer
 - 2020
 - COVID-19 – 53 street whānau are placed into emergency housing by our team, peer support shifts online, there are more people to support and a street outreach focus
 - More peer support training
 - A Lifewise Works review demonstrates growth in staff and jobs and it becomes established as a social enterprise
 - Peer volunteer pathway support model developed
 - COVID-19 related work includes capturing learning, embedding the navigator service and an increased focus on digital literacy

"We learn by starting small, trying things and building on strengths. Key people play roles of anchors and visionaries, and energy shifts as people come and go and collaborations form."

Our mahi: peer support

"It takes a certain breed to do peer support. You need to be able to deal with intimidation, be able to check people, give tough love, be pono, firm, not be pushed around."

"We pick someone up off the concrete, give them a home, the ones that want to move forward come to our [peer support] team. They won't find that at other services. This comes from the heart. The thank you we get is more than the money. We are here for that. We were on the concrete years ago. The thank you is larger than any substance any of us have used. The koha of the handshake goes hand in hand with the aroha we put out."

Through Merge Community, people who have lived on the street are trained and supported to guide street whānau and be role models. Peer support is provided in four ways:



1

Peer Support Volunteers

support people face to face at Merge Café on K'Rd or in the space upstairs from the café. They receive a contribution to their expenses and this volunteering can lead to paid employment

2

The Peer Outreach

team connects with street whānau living and sleeping rough in the inner city, working with them to access other support services when they are ready. They also liaise with local businesses, organisations and community around issues relating to street whānau experiences

3

Two Peer Navigators

support people in emergency housing into secure housing, based on referrals from the Ministry of Social Development. They help people access support services and develop goals, and provide advocacy when people are disadvantaged or need support to navigate social and private housing systems

4

Haven is a peer-led after hours support space hosted at Merge Café, in collaboration with Lifewise, Odyssey and Mind and Body (who all run a peer support approach to addiction, mental health or homelessness). Held by Odyssey, Haven also provides a space to develop peer support ideas and approaches

Peer support is strengths based and helps people find their own solutions. We wrap training and support around our peer support team, including coaching and individual and group supervision. We have regular team meetings to spot trends, celebrate whānau success and bring in expertise. For example, the team noticed some migrant homelessness, so brought in E Tu Whānau to provide guidance on where to refer.

A typical day for the peer support team might involve:



listening to someone and identifying with them what support they need



calming someone in distress and referring them to mental health or addiction support



advising someone on a safe place to sleep that night, or on how to sustain a tenancy, or referring them to housing pathways



helping someone get a feed at Merge Café through its 'pay it forward' meal scheme



hanging out in Merge Café with street whānau and the local community



helping someone deal with a relationship dispute or issue with the Police



going with someone to Work and Income to ensure they receive their benefit entitlement



showing someone how to use a computer to access support online



working with a business to address rough sleeping on their premises.

Our mahi: earning and development through enterprise



“We expect over time that people who have been unable to work for many years will have opportunities to create income through these initiatives. We develop models of wealth generation that are flexible so that people can improve their financial independence while maintaining their wellbeing.”

Street whānau can have considerable barriers to work, such as low trust of people and systems, cognitive and mental health challenges, a criminal record, chaotic busy lives, addiction issues and lack of work experience. People need to actively manage their wellbeing and traditional work environments are often not suitable.

At the same time, many want to earn extra legal income or just have meaningful things to do, including those who are housed. Regular conversations include:

“I want to use my hands; I need stuff to do or I’ll go back to drinking; I need something to do besides sit at home.”

Many struggle to deal with living costs, especially food and setting up their house with furniture. For some, living on the streets helps avoid overwhelming debt, and this debt remains a barrier to finding work and being visible to ‘the system’ (banks, government agencies, having ID and being traceable etc).

Micro-enterprise opportunities such as carving and crafts enable people to supplement their benefit. We have observed that if people are involved in positive activities, they reduce their drug taking, start to make changes in their living situation, and experience improved mental wellbeing. For some it is a first step to work and recovery.

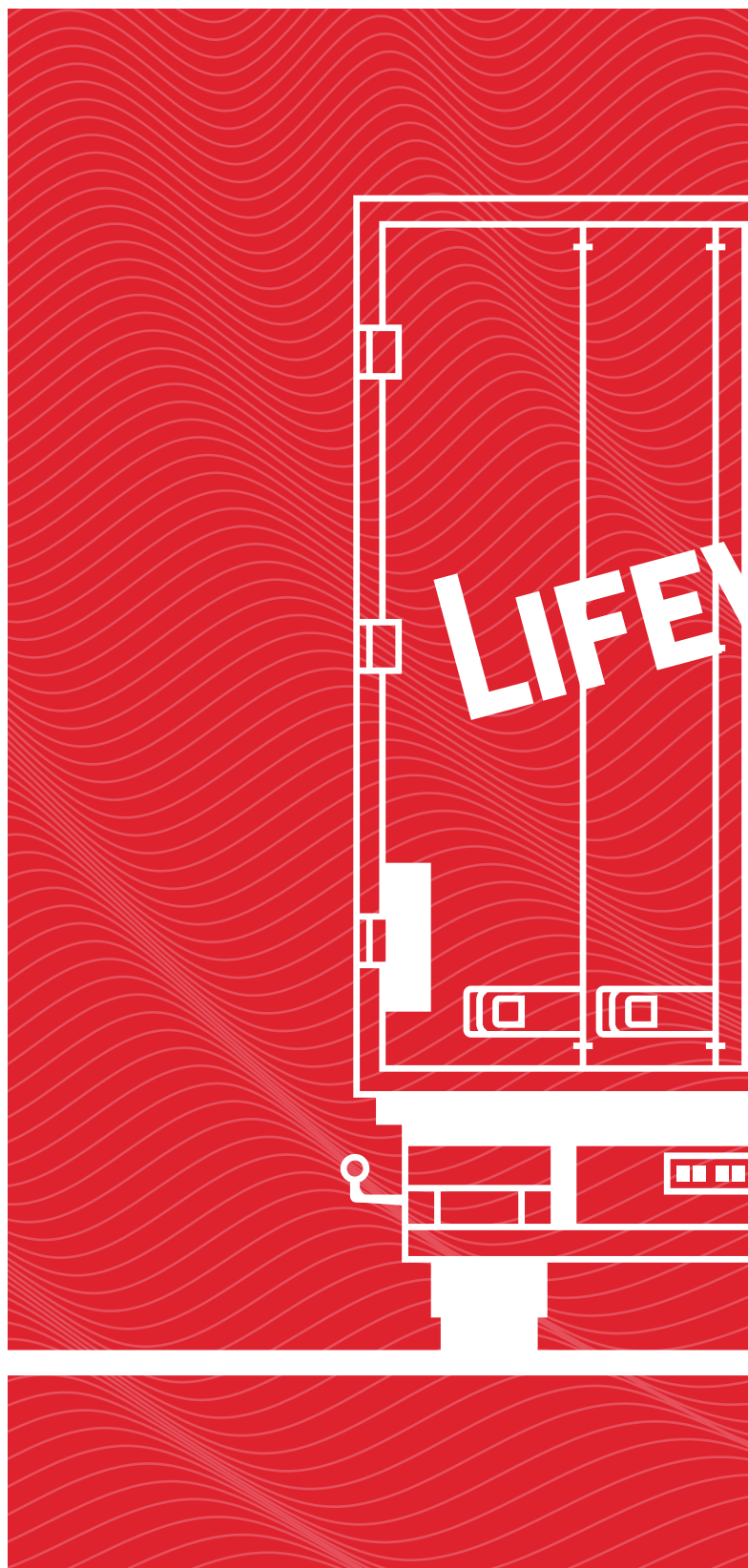
We co-design and test income generating ideas with street whānau, to build confidence, pride, work skills, a sense of purpose and generate income. We have learned to design work opportunities around people, NOT people around work. We allow space for people to attend to their own wellbeing and the obligations they have in their lives, such as supporting whānau or probation requirements. We know that people are worried about losing their benefit if they earn over \$80, so we designed four hour shifts and help them keep track of their earnings.

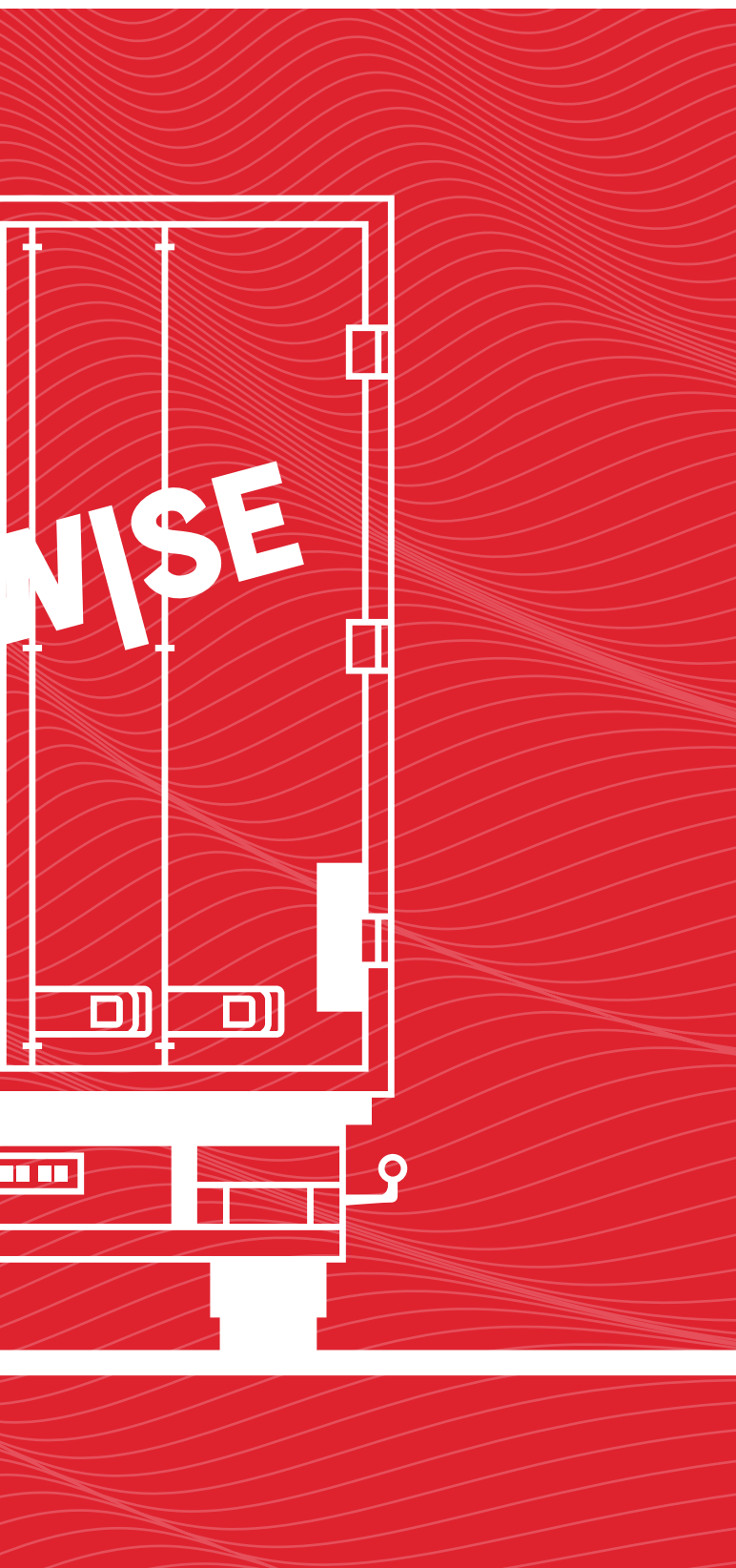
Current examples of Merge Community enterprises include:

- Co-design Group - training people with lived experience of rough sleeping to support research and provide consultancy advice on issues affecting street whānau. People are contracted by organisations such as Auckland Council and the Auckland District Health Board.
- Urban Hikoi provides guided hikoi (walks) around the city centre, led by people who have experienced sleeping rough. They invite people to see the city through their eyes; as a bedroom, a lounge, a playground, a bathroom, and in this way build empathy and tackle myths about people on the street. We are trialling a 90-minute experience as an offering for locals and tourists.
- Piki Toi harnesses the creative skills of street whānau and the Unitec Design School to make and sell art. Public art works have been commissioned (for example on the K' Road overbridge) and exhibitions held in spaces such as Merge Café and the Ellen Melville Centre, and during Art Week. Some of the artists involved have set up their own Trust with other community partners. A book about Piki Toi is due out early in 2021.



Lifewise related income generation opportunities and pathways for street whānau can also emerge from being a peer support volunteer. This can lead to paid peer support roles as a Merge Community Navigator or Outreach worker, or at Haven, Housing First or other organisations. Other options are becoming a co-design expert or joining Lifewise Works (see next page).





Lifewise Works

Lifewise Works is a social enterprise offering cleaning and moving services to social housing providers and new builds. Currently this is mainly to Housing First (which is part of Lifewise) and Airedale Property Trust (a sister organisation to Lifewise), to clean vacant apartments and houses in preparation for a new tenant. It offers a safe place for our whānau to stretch their work muscle in an environment where:

- mistakes can happen and are forgiven
- people and their relationship with Work and Income is understood and protected
- people are accepted, regardless of their past
- people learn what it is to be part of an organisation and in employment
- people can accrue holiday pay and learn about this form of saving
- Lifewise becomes trusted as an organisation.

Lifewise Works began as a pilot in 2019 and was reviewed in 2020. The review showed that whānau involved in Lifewise Works experience:

- a sense of purpose, confidence, belonging and connection
- opportunities to learn new skills, including digital and work readiness skills
- a learning environment that helps them to understand work routine, teamwork and build work skills.

Incentives for people to join Lifewise Works are to earn extra money, build new skills and prove their value as an employee to potential employers, despite their past.

Going forward, Lifewise Works is refining its business model and processes, and looking at what people need to make the leap from casual employment to part and full-time sustainable work, either with Lifewise Works or other organisations.

Our mahi: raising voices

We raise the voices of lived experience through peer support, co-design processes, research, hui/events, telling stories and advocacy.

Levels Of Advocacy

Peer support provides individual advocacy to help people address their specific needs. It also supports people to learn how to advocate for themselves. The Peer Emergency Housing Navigation team is learning the importance of advocating with and coaching those living in emergency housing, to access social housing. For example, we are capturing stories of social housing providers having conflicting criteria, and adverse consequences for whānau surrounding the acceptance or decline of property offers³.



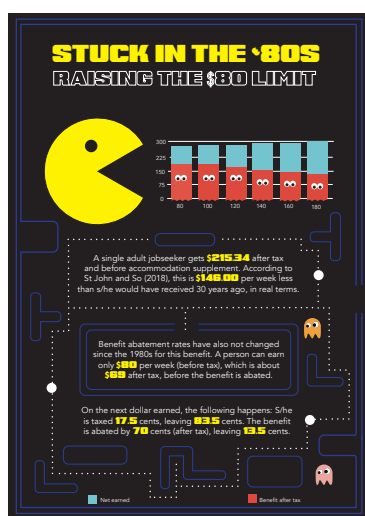
Group advocacy grows understanding of rough sleeping and homelessness. Examples include Street – Stories of homelessness from the Merge Community (2019); Mana Wahine (2017) which shares women's experience of homelessness in the Auckland City Centre; and supporting people with lived experience to speak at events such as the 2019 Philanthropy New Zealand Conference, on television (The Project) and via print and social media.

Organisational advocacy supports the Co-design Group to advise agencies such as Auckland Council on issues affecting them and their peers in the inner city – for example reporting on people's experience of their front-line services.

System advocacy seeks to change policies, processes and structures. With our "Stuck in the 80s" campaign, we advocated to raise benefit abatement levels to the government appointed Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG). In hosting a hui involving the WEAG panel and street whānau, moving kōrero was shared about how current welfare policies impact whānau and the lengths they are driven to survive. This clearly moved the panel and they endorsed and included our submission in their recommendations to government.

Our insights from a Synthetics Hui informed an Innovation Fund, which eventually led to the formation of Haven, the after-hours peer support group based at Merge Café. In late 2019, a community hui with 20 people with lived experience informed the Government's National Strategy on Homelessness.

The need for lived experience to guide ongoing advocacy efforts relating to homelessness will only increase, and is vital for system change.



³ For example, people being declined social housing offers for missing one phone call, or limited property offers due to systemic or operational issues between government agencies and housing providers.

Our mahi: community development

We support ideas from street whānau to be tested and to fly, and 'merge' communities to break down myths and bring people together. For example, we tested community building at emergency housing motels, such as shared cooking spaces and support groups for addiction. This has led to working with motel owners to provide access to information, resources and support, and create spaces for connection.

We trial community spaces such as maker spaces and community resource spaces, for example Te Whare – a community resource space in Pitt St, that was kaupapa Māori and lived-experience led, bringing artists and creatives together and building community.

Merge Community has identified a need for community spaces where people can drop in and engage in purposeful activities that create healing, a sense of inclusion and counter boredom. Some people also have the skills and readiness to work on their own project but have no suitable space to do it, or to pass on their knowledge to others.

The city centre has a diverse residential population and there needs to be places where people can come together. We continue to advocate for local community-led creative and maker spaces with a kaupapa Māori approach. We have prototyped this concept and found it to have been successful with people who are not interested in engaging in other services or activities.



Successes

Some numbers

- 500** people supported each year via peer support and individual advocacy (5-10 a day)
- 150** people supported into emergency, private or wrap around housing options
- 350** people attending Haven peer-led support weekly⁵
- 100s** of people contributing and taking part in hui, activities, co-design, research and story telling
- 50+** people with opportunities to work, earn and volunteer
- 60** people trained in peer support, advocacy, and other relevant skills⁶
- 15** people with significant barriers to work employed at Lifewise and via Lifewise social enterprises
- 6** people move from casual into fixed paid roles
- 3** people set up their own enterprise or Trust
- 100+** cleaning and moving jobs completed via Lifewise Works in the first 12 months, with 8 people placed on a casual contract
- 3** exhibitions of street artists hosted and commissioning of street furniture and a street mural through Piki Toi. Some of Piki Toi artist's work is to be included in Desire Paths, an exhibition by the Center for Craft, Asheville USA
- 6** Urban Hikoi guided tours with an average of 40 people each tour, hosted by 6 street whānau

Influence and advocacy relating to council bylaws and policies, drug policy, benefit abatement levels and the national homeless strategy

⁵ Haven is a successful collaboration between Lifewise, Mind and Body and Odyssey, who holds the contract. All providers contribute peer support workers. Some of its success relates to Merge Café's reputation and location. At Merge Community we have seen an increase in referrals to peer support advocacy the Monday following each Haven weekend session (around 15 referrals compared to the usual 5-10).

⁶ This includes peer support training for 40 people, advocacy training for 20 people, 8 people trained in co-design and 10 in facilitation.

Personal transformation

The Merge Community team said that the benefits of being involved as a volunteer, worker or as part of the wider community through its activities were:

Housing and work:

“I got housed, got a contract.”

Leading solutions:

“Merge peer support was built from the streets up, we co-designed it.”

Coming off drugs:

“I came off drugs to be part of this community [peer support team].”

Credits and credentials:

“Meth Decontamination Certificate.”

Community:

“We talk about the hard stuff as peers.”

Pride, purpose and self-determination:

“I moved from being a client to a peer support volunteer; I came to see what they could do for me and saw I could do things for myself.”

Influencing:

“We got men’s and women’s groups going at Compass Housing; People are connecting with me, they are seeing me changing – I see them watching me; People engage where they used to run away.”

Helping others:

“We give ourselves, we had nothing left to lose.”

Much of the progress and transformation for individual street whānau via Merge Community is anecdotal, hidden or silent. Our small team has been focused on growing the peer support team, enterprise pathways and improving life with street whānau, which has many ongoing ripple effects.



People with lived experience who have taken on roles in governance, peer support or community development have grown in mana and purpose as they develop their skills and witness their effectiveness. These skills are shared with broader street whānau in a ripple effect.



Successes from the disruption of COVID-19

"Since COVID-19 the reputation of Merge Community for helping people fast has grown, we are getting more people through word of mouth."

The world changed for street whānau overnight when the first COVID-19 lockdown began, with businesses closing and means for connection and hustling ceasing to exist. During the COVID-19 emergency response from 25 March to 30 April, around 100 people approached the Merge Community team for support to access emergency housing. As a result:

53

people were supported by Lifewise into motel accommodation and supported over the lockdown

20

of these people were supported by Housing First to move into their own homes

46

were referred to other providers or into emergency accommodation

In the August 2020 lockdown five long term rough sleepers, who had previously lacked trust in services, were supported into emergency housing.

Outside Merge Café became a meeting spot for access to accommodation and regular updates about active cases of COVID-19, and how to access food, banks, government agencies and council and government related communications that were vital at the time. Peer support volunteers helped with clothing and food distribution during levels two and three.

The outreach team continues to provide information on COVID-19 to the street community. Street welfare checks are also carried out regularly to ensure people are getting the support they need. We have open conversations with street whānau about their substance use and mental health.



Challenges

Among the aroha, connections and daily life, our community context is one of complexity, chaos, the ongoing effects of trauma and associated triggers.

Recent trends we are seeing in 2020 include:

- While more people are being housed in emergency housing, they are experiencing isolation and boredom and travel into the city for social connection, to hustle and access support. Newly housed people are in urgent need of meaningful activity, especially those in inner city apartments with no outside spaces.
- Some housed whānau share and use drugs in public places such as parks, to protect their homes from others arriving uninvited and to retain their tenancy. Substance abuse and dealing at times become more visible in the inner city. There are also tensions between whānau turning up and jeopardising tenancies through overcrowding, drug use, noise and antisocial behaviour, versus turning whānau away and being socially isolated.
- More people on low-incomes are moving into the inner-city, and population growth is placing more pressure on housing and existing services.
- Mental health issues and addictions continue to impact on street whānau and with COVID-19 seem to be more visible. This affects the wellbeing of the business and resident community and their tolerance levels, especially as mental health and addiction services can be hard to navigate, refer to or are overloaded.

At Merge Community we are well aware of the struggles our community faces:

"The community is struggling, we [peer support volunteers] are struggling."

Some street whānau can take things for granted, be abusive, have unrealistic expectations, or don't want to play their part:

"People need to do the mahi before getting a feed...Some people want money but they don't want to work for it."

"It's uncomfortable work, lots of power dynamics and issues."

"We know how our street people are, we know how they hide, working with them can be hard but we accept that challenge, we give it another day."

There can be a vast gap between the experience of street whānau and others:

"Straight people don't see what we see – we need to treat people equally,"

and between the mainly Māori street whānau and the non-Māori mindsets and systems surrounding them.

Staying with the work can be hard:

"Volunteers come and go, they get tired, stressed, sick of it"

and peer support work can be retraumatising. Self-care and looking after the Merge Community team is a constant need.

Upholding lived experience and a community-led approach can also be challenging when 'business as usual' is a service-led approach, and in the context of stigma and poor understanding of homelessness. Sustainable resourcing, with enough resource and capacity to be responsive to whānau needs whilst also working strategically, are ongoing issues.

Learning about what it takes to support street whānau

We have identified five key ingredients to supporting street whānau effectively.

1

Deep commitment to lived experience and whānau-led

“An organisation that gets it and supports it [a community-led approach] is vital.”

We believe that empathy is not enough and that people with lived experience must be supported to help themselves and their peers, co-design and lead their own change. This can be challenging in the face of organisational demands, funder expectations, bias and pressure to achieve results. Conditions for upholding lived experience and a whānau-led approach include:

- Peer support and role modelling approaches
- Skilled co-design and inclusive collaboration as a way of being
- Supporting leadership development, and especially Māori and Pacific leadership
- A willingness to experiment, test, collectively problem solve, make mistakes and fail
- Ongoing learning about trauma, stress, brain science and body language
- Regular reflection, evaluation and shared learning
- Sustainable resourcing, including of the backbone work (administration and organising).

2

Tikanga based and heart-centred

“There is constant forming, storming and norming, the community challenges you to be real, to show your heart, be authentic, until you do that they won’t engage, we ask them to reveal themselves, we must be prepared to do the same.”

At least 80 percent of street whānau in inner city Auckland are Māori and building tikanga Māori understanding and practice within the work is fundamental. Lifewise has employed a Pou Manukura/ Cultural Advisor and is partnering with Ngāti Whatua, to strengthen tikanga based practice in Lifewise. Where non-Māori work with the street community:

“Core values need to align, people feel manaaki more than race, people will coach us or call us out”.

A heart-centred approach means bringing your whole self to the work, being open, non-judgemental, accepting, willing to show yourself and be vulnerable. This can be in tension with ideas about ‘professionalism’. Intuition, active listening, patience, persistence, life experience, self-awareness and ‘antenna’ are needed to work in this space. Strong self-awareness and identity are also needed, and avoidance of trying to ‘fix’, be a rescuer or a hero. Being affirming and encouraging, avoiding pity, giving thanks for sharing and for turning up is also fundamental: Seeing the gold in people and tapping into that, rather than focusing on ‘problems’.

Given the complex and challenging nature of the work, tailored support and self-care are critical: We carry a lot of stories and hold heavy stuff, it takes strong people to do this mahi, you need to love yourself and look after yourself.

3

When you are ready – open doors, invitations and incentives

“You can fall as many times as you like – you can come back [to Merge Community]. We keep an open mind and an open door.”

“People need flexibility to work on themselves and their whānau, to go at their own pace, we can’t rush people or go too slow.”

We keep our doors open, learn to read people’s readiness for change and work at the pace of whānau. While Merge Café is our main doorway, we have the office space upstairs, our outreach team, our enterprises and our community spaces. We need visibility and to offer a range of invitations to connect, for example via Merge Café, online and via our outreach team wearing uniforms and offering cards to street whānau.

Showing awhi and care to whānau is important, via for example kai, access to housing, training, credits, credentials, work, help with transport, volunteer opportunities, addiction and mental health support, meaningful activities and community. Showing awhi by doing extra little things to support someone or their family builds trust, relationships and reciprocity.

COVID-19 highlighted the need for digital literacy support, including access to computers, how to set up email and do benefit applications:

“The whānau need to be digitalized.”

4 Doing what it takes

“We have learned what works with the whānau: kai, don’t hide or lie, come with full trust and they won’t lie to you...Our whānau need a kind and forgiving environment where they can make mistakes and be forgiven.”

“Change happens at the speed of trust.”

It can take a very long time to build trust, relationships and readiness for change. Once people take the step of connecting with Merge Community, we need to be patient, lean in and stay in, sometimes under very testing circumstances. We need to be present in tinana and wairua (body and spirit) and lean into crisis points as moments of potential change and growth.

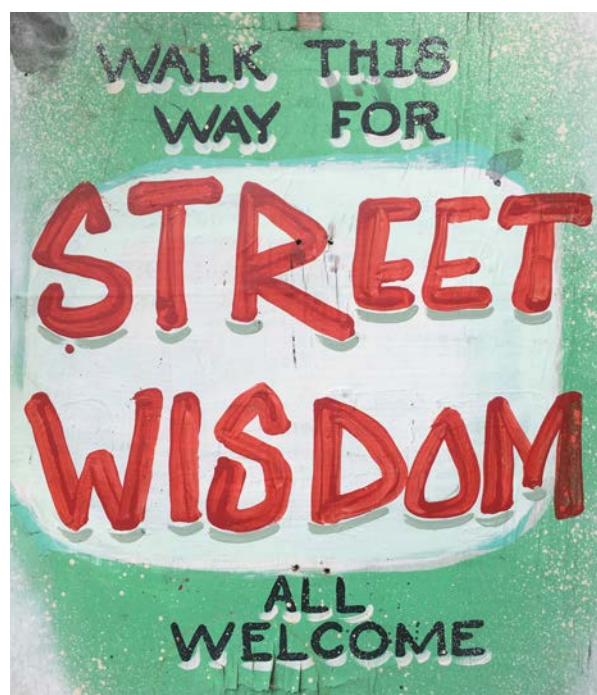
This can often mean going above and beyond to build trust and support people who have difficult things to navigate. We do things to remove immediate stress and create bandwidth, such as provide a HOP transport card or some kai or clothes. The ability to be flexible and let go of plans is also important: You can have plans but need to be able to let them fall away.

5

Build activity and work around people

“Fear of getting ‘seen’ by WINZ meant one of our Lifewise Works crew wanted to receive koha for their work so that they wouldn’t get in trouble. After some time and conversations they agreed to go on contract, which is a major shift for them.”

We have learned that we need to build work and income earning opportunities around people, rather than try and fit people into existing work. We construct pathways for people around their skills, interest and knowledge, going with their energy and exploring their ideas. This takes time and perseverance and having difficult conversations about money, which requires a degree of trust. Many people have significant debt and fear being ‘found’, or fear losing their benefit if they work. The \$80 benefit abatement level and the way it disincentivises people from seeking paid work catalysed the Stuck in the 80s campaign. Focusing on one or two enterprises (especially Lifewise Works) with a small team has been beneficial and resulted in its expansion.

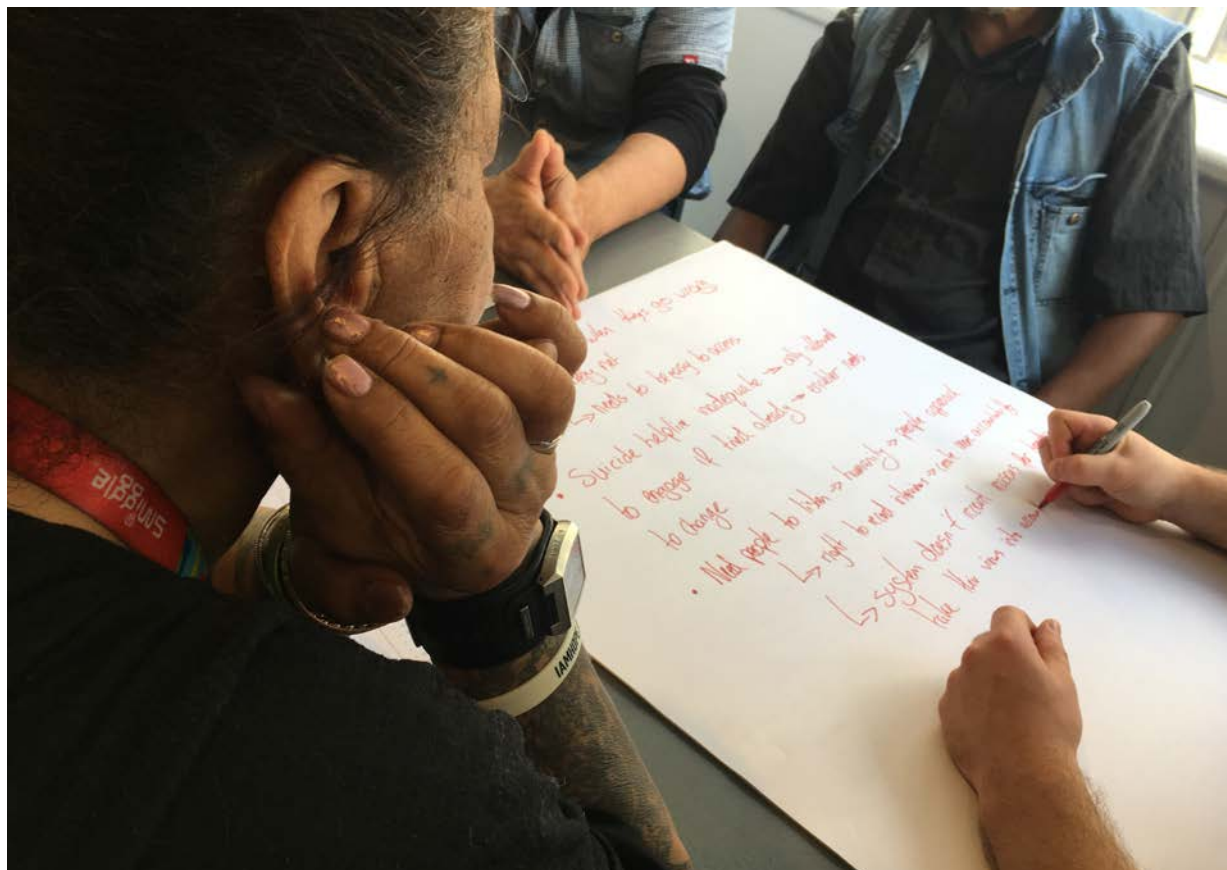


Learning about what is needed to tackle homelessness

Our experience as Merge Community has highlighted the need for these things, to more effectively tackle the growing issue of homelessness in our communities.

- 1 Lived experience more intentionally driving the design of services, policy, advocacy and system change, including Māori-led approaches and solutions. Getting behind and beside our Māori leaders with lived experience of homelessness is vital.
- 2 Advocacy and collective action to shift the drivers of poverty and marginalisation, including raising benefit levels, and greater advocacy and equity for those who rent privately.
- 3 Ongoing and increased investment in models like Housing First, and in social housing that works for diverse whānau and social structures.
- 4 Valuing and supporting the work of aroha - there are many people in our communities holding whānau together, looking after so many and giving their time for the benefit of their communities. That work of aroha and volunteering is critical and needs to be recognised by our welfare system.
- 5 Greater training and understanding in social services, schools, whānau and communities on how the brain works and working with trauma.
- 6 Support for whānau to sustain tenancies, including transitional housing options, workshops on how to clean for inspection, cook and pay bills, community-led support groups and housing induction processes, with access to mentoring and ongoing support.
- 7 Government investment in approaches like Merge Community, that focus on place building, peer support approaches and connecting communities.
- 8 Shifting the investment from prisons into models of change, community and compassion. Stop investing in models that are broken.
- 9 Increased government support for drug, alcohol and mental health services and community-based approaches to wellbeing such as Haven, that are accessible to the community.
- 10 Incentives, encouragement, volunteering and income generating pathways for street whānau, that are co-designed by them and tailored to their specific needs.
- 11 Regular reflection, effective evaluation and sharing of learning for influence.

How might Merge Community...?



From 2021 we will seek to...

- Train and develop more people with lived experience of homelessness in peer support, advocacy, co-design, governance and leadership.
- Strengthen our Tikanga Māori and Māori-led approaches.
- Further develop our peer support and enterprise pathways so people can move into sustainable work and career opportunities beyond Lifewise.
- Collaborate with others to offer more community and kaupapa Māori spaces for people to create, heal and connect with their inner city community.
- Through advocacy and a community development approach, support people in private rentals and social housing.
- Advocate and support people with high government debt and low benefit levels.
- Collaborate with others to develop community-led food collectives and other wellbeing activations.
- Become sustainably resourced through enterprise and contracts that work for us and those we serve.
- Develop, evaluate and share the practice and approaches of Merge so that we can grow the ripples in a sustaining way for all.



Riporipo kau ana, ka pōkarekare te wai.

The whirlpool we create, causes ripples.
Our experiences influence others.

References and resources

Merge Community/Lifewise Related References

Lifewise Trust, Auckland Council, Auckland City Mission and Thinkplace (2015). An insight into the experience of rough sleeping in Auckland, see <https://www.lifewise.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/rough-sleeping-report.pdf>

Lifewise and Te Miringa Trust (2017). Mana Wahine: Building an understanding of women's experience of homelessness in the Auckland City Centre, see <https://www.lifewise.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/MANA-WAHINE-Findl.pdf>

Lifewise Trust and Auckland Council (2017). Inside the Cup: Bringing the Street Voice to Decision Makers, see [CUPREPORT-online-4MB-file.pdf](https://www.lifewise.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CUPREPORT-online-4MB-file.pdf) ([lifewise.org.nz](https://www.lifewise.org.nz))

Lifewise Trust (2019). Street: Stories of homelessness from the Merge community. Hard copies available at Merge Café and from Lifewise Trust.

Additional Resources

Here are some of the ideas that have influenced Merge Community or align with our approach.

Lisa Attygalle (no date). Understanding Community-Led Approaches to Community Change, Tamarack Institute, see <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/paper-understanding-community-led-approaches-community-change-lisa-attygalle>

Charles Leadbeater, with the Australian Centre for Social Innovation (2019). When Love Meets Power, TACSI, see https://www.tacsi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/TACSI_LovePower_Report_V1.7.pdf, see also <https://www.tacsi.org.au/journal/when-love-meets-power/>

Nesta (September 2020). Reimagining Help: An evidenced-based approach to helping people reach their goals, see <https://www.nesta.org.uk/toolkit/reimagining-help/>

Liz Weaver (2019). Turf, Trust, Cooperation and Collective Impact, Tamarack, see <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/library/turf-trust-co-creation-collective-impact>

Margaret Wheatley (2010). Perseverance. Bennett – Kohler Publishers Inc, A Berkana Publication.

Appendix One:

Merge Community Theory of Change 2020

The Challenge

People in Auckland's inner city with experience of rough sleeping or who are vulnerably housed, are often excluded from work, support, society and life opportunities

The Opportunity

To support healing, wellbeing and realising the potential of this resilient and resourceful group

Assumptions

- We have skills/ experience to facilitate community-led, peer support and lived experience approaches
- Support of Lifewise people and infrastructure
- People have access to sustainable housing and other supports
- People come with ideas, solutions and skills to share

The Broad Goal

People with lived experience of rough sleeping live fulfilling lives, are in sustainable housing and feel valued and supported by the wider community

Eventually this will lead to:

A ripple effect – a self determining community of influence, activation and support

If We	By	This will lead to
Support people with lived experience of rough sleeping to provide peer to peer support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Providing training and healing support ▪ Opportunities to volunteer and work ▪ Ongoing support and coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improved wellbeing for peers and others ▪ Increased community support ▪ Improved pathways for people accessing housing/ services
Co-create opportunities for people to grow their resources and be self-determining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Scaffolding pathways to enterprise and employment ▪ Tapping into skills and assets ▪ Providing places/hubs to connect, share and learn ▪ Partnering with others 	<p>People will have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More independence, money and resources ▪ Sustainable tenancy ▪ Improved volunteering and employment options ▪ Social connections
Raise the voices of lived experience, to change mindsets and systems that marginalize people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Providing advocacy and navigation options ▪ Opportunities to inform and influence ▪ Providing coaching, tools and training, Eg. digital 	<p>People:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advocating for themselves and others ▪ Improving their situation ▪ Contributing to system and policy changes ▪ Reducing stigma

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LIFEWISE