

Connect



A message from our CE

Kia ora koutou,

Where has the year gone already? Here we are in May, and it feels as though the months have moved past in a steady blur of activity, challenge, learning and quiet moments of progress.

The last time I wrote this piece, I did so as **Executive Chair of the Three Trusts – Lifewise, Methodist Mission Northern and Airedale Property Trust**. Since then, I've stepped into the role of **Chief Executive**, and in doing so have had the privilege of seeing our mahi from an even closer vantage point — alongside the people, teams and whānau who bring it to life every day.

This issue of *Lifewise Connect* reflects that lived reality. Inside you'll find stories of care and persistence: lived experience peer workers supporting whānau at Merge Café; health services being delivered where children already learn and feel safe; individuals rebuilding

confidence through employment, housing and community connection; and reflections that remind us just how deeply human this work is.

Recently, Merge Café was featured on **Seven Sharp**, offering a glimpse into the daily realities faced by people experiencing homelessness — and the quiet, consistent support that meets them with dignity, warmth and belonging. It was a powerful reminder that behind every headline are people, relationships and long days of advocacy.

You'll also read about the upcoming **Big Sleepout**, an opportunity for leaders and supporters to stand in solidarity with those who experience homelessness every night. This year, I've signed up to take part and fundraise myself — not as a challenge, but as a statement of shared responsibility. I encourage you, in whatever way feels right, to get in behind this kaupapa and the work of Lifewise and Merge Café.

The Mana Whānau evaluation featured in this issue reinforces something

many of us already know: lasting change doesn't come from quick fixes or rigid systems. It grows through relationships grounded in trust, respect and belief in whānau strengths. That kaupapa flows through every story you'll read here.

Taken together, these stories show what Lifewise looks like in practice — people walking alongside others at their own pace, meeting immediate needs while holding hope for what comes next.

Thank you for taking the time to pause with us, to reflect, and to remain part of this shared work.

Pam Elgar, ONZM
Chief Executive, Lifewise



Inside this issue...



The Big Sleepout—supporting Lifewise and Merge Café



Merge Café in the spotlight on Seven Sharp



Honouring Whānau Strength: What the Mana Whānau Evaluation Tells Us

A Day in the Life of a Lived Experience Peer Support Worker at Merge Café

We've learnt not to say the words "it might be a quiet day." Those words have a way of unravelling before the morning has even settled.

By Tam, Merge Café is already alive

The gentle hum of coffee machines, familiar faces, and the steady stream of whānau mark the start. For a peer support worker, each day begins not with a plan, but with people. The peer connector greets everyone with manaakitanga, offering warmth, safety, and welcome without judgement. They intuitively gauge the room, connecting whānau to the peer support team as needed.

A māmā arrives, six tamariki beside her

Following the upheaval of a relationship breakdown, the māmā faced eviction. With her temporary shelter with whānau now gone, she found herself without a safe place to stay. At Merge Café, there is no judgement—only a commitment to safety, warmth, and genuine care. The embrace of community is tangible; generosity ensures a nourishing hot meal, and the tamariki are gifted hand-knitted pōtae, scarves, and a blanket for the pēpi, lovingly knitted by the Good Yarns ladies at St Stephens Presbyterian church in Herne Bay. These simple yet heartfelt gestures offer more than comfort—they serve to uphold and affirm the dignity of whānau during times of hardship.

When a peer support worker accompanies the māmā to WINZ for emergency housing, they are initially turned away. It's a familiar setback, demanding steadfast advocacy. An experienced peer worker joins by phone, offering collective strength and unwavering commitment. Through calm persistence, the conversation shifts;



eventually, the whānau are placed in a hotel, safe until long-term housing is found.

Then, someone arrives straight from prison, carrying nothing but the clothes they wear. No ID, bank account, benefit, or place to stay. Beneath the surface lie years of intergenerational trauma. The first task is identity—a birth certificate application, then navigating the barriers to opening a bank account. Persistence and relationships forge new pathways.

Next, WINZ: food grants, clothing, blankets, all requiring time, advocacy, and deep understanding of a challenging system. Housing is only part of the picture. Peer workers support whānau through probation requirements, often set at inaccessible locations, with little resources or flexibility. Advocacy with Corrections negotiates practical solutions, but these systems have often closed doors before.

For some, housing means a boarding house or caravan park—not ideal, but a step toward stability and the hope of

secure, sustainable housing.

Support doesn't end there. It may mean standing beside someone in court, ensuring their lawyer sees their effort, progress, and commitment to change. Sharing their story restores dignity and possibility.

Throughout the day, the Merge peer support workers move from appointment to appointment, often supporting multiple whānau simultaneously. There's little pause. They are carried not by obligation, but by passion and a deep belief in every person's potential.

This is the work

It's complex, relentless, and deeply human—navigating systems, challenging barriers, holding space for transformation. Every step, every conversation, is a chance to shift the path. They may be a small team, but their lived experience and support are mighty.

There's no such thing as a quiet day.

The Big Sleepout: Supporting Lifewise and Merge Café

Each year, the Big Sleepout brings people together to pause, reflect and stand in solidarity with those who experience homelessness every day.

This year's event is shaping up to be bigger than ever, with business and community leaders spending a night sleeping rough to support Lifewise and Merge Café — a place of belonging where people can access a warm meal, connection, and practical support to move toward housing and stability.

The urgency behind this kaupapa remains real. Across Aotearoa, more than 112,000 people are severely housing deprived, and every night hundreds of people sleep rough in Tāmaki Makaurau. While policy responses continue to evolve, the human need for compassion, dignity and practical support has never been clearer.

We are grateful to AUT for once again opening their campus to host the event, and to the

many media partners who are helping amplify these stories with care and integrity, including MediaWorks, NZME, OMD, Stuff and MetService.

Leaders Taking Action

We are encouraged by the range of leaders who have stepped forward to take part — from across politics, business, media and community organisations. Their willingness to show up, listen and contribute sends a powerful message about shared responsibility and collective care.

As a community of Lifewise supporters, you help make this work possible every day. If you'd like to learn more about the Big Sleepout, the people taking part, or how funds raised support Merge Café, you can visit bigsleepout.org.nz.

Across Aotearoa, more than **112,000** people are severely housing deprived.



We're On the Move

From **1 July 2026**, Lifewise, Methodist Mission Northern, and Airedale Property Trust services currently based at 124 Vincent Street and Gordon House, Mt Eden will be coming together at a new shared location at 110 Symonds Street.

This move brings teams closer together and creates a shared base as we continue our collective work alongside communities and whānau.

Merge Café in the Spotlight on Seven Sharp

On 30 April 2026, Merge Café welcomed the Seven Sharp team for a visit that shone a national spotlight on the heart of our community.

The feature highlighted what makes Merge Café so special – not just great food, but a place of connection, dignity and belonging. As viewers saw, Merge is a space where people from all walks of life come together, where conversations are shared as freely as the meals, and where everyone is welcomed with manaakitanga.

For our team, volunteers and supporters, the segment was a proud moment. It

captured the everyday impact of a kaupapa rooted in care, inclusion and second chances, and reinforced why spaces like Merge Café matter so deeply in our communities.

We're grateful to Seven Sharp for helping tell this story, and to everyone who contributes to making Merge Café a place of warmth, connection and hope – every single day.

It captured the everyday impact of a kaupapa rooted in care, inclusion and second chances,

If you missed the show, don't worry check it out at [youtube.com/lifewisenz](https://www.youtube.com/lifewisenz)



Got Green Fingers (or wanting to get some)?

What if community connection started with a handful of seeds?

Myers Park Cottage is hosting a free inner city get together designed to help apartment residents meet their neighbours, learn simple urban gardening skills, and bring more green (and more kai) to balconies, windowsills, and any local patch of dirt.

Levi Brinsdon-Hall from **Delicious Revolution** will be on hand with expert advice, and is offering a **six week online learning programme** (with seedlings) **free** to inner city residents—so you can keep learning and growing long after the day ends.

- Connect with other inner city garden projects
- Figure out what you can grow successfully in your space
- Learn how to grow plants from seed
- Take home a gardening resource pack (trays, seeds and seedling mix), supported by weekly online workshops
- Join a network of seedling givers and help others grow their own kai

From an Auckland Council perspective, this is a place led activation—anchored to Myers Park Cottage as a neighbourhood hub. The goal

isn't just gardening; it's helping residents feel a sense of belonging and ownership in their part of the city centre, so the connections (and the momentum) last beyond any single programme.

Where: Myers Park Cottage

When: Sun 24 May or Sat 6 Jun

Time: 10.30am – 4.30pm

Cost: Free (registration required via Eventbrite)

Hosted by Myers Park Cottage. Delivered by Delicious Revolution. Funded by Auckland Council.



Stories that Stay With Us

A reflection from a member of our Health & Disability team

One of the great privileges of my role is hearing the life stories of the people we support. Every person carries a journey — some filled with joy, others marked by deep loss and hardship — and it is an honour when those stories are shared.

One client spoke to me about his time serving in the Royal New Zealand Navy. At just 18 years old, he was deployed to the Pacific during weapons testing involving Agent Orange. With minimal protective equipment, he and his cohort were exposed to forces and substances they could never have understood at the time.

Of the group he served alongside, only ten lived beyond the age of 25. Many others experienced severe and lasting health issues — impacts that continue to shape

their lives today. Reading the account of one of his cohort, published recently, brought home just how frightening and unjust those experiences were.

These stories remind us that the consequences of decisions made decades ago are still carried by people we meet and support today. They shape bodies, health, and whānau, and deserve to be acknowledged with respect.

And yet, alongside the heaviness, there is also humour, resilience and light.



One of our clients, living with early onset dementia, once said with a grin that she had “apparently been married twice — though they couldn’t have been very good, because I can’t remember them.”

Moments like that stay with you. They remind us of the humanity, strength and spirit within the people we are lucky to support.

Bringing Health Care to Where Children Learn

At Lifewise, we know that children thrive when their health, learning and whānau support are all working together. That's why mobile health clinics are such an important part of the support we offer through Lifewise ECE.

By partnering with the ARDS mobile clinic, we're able to bring vital health services directly into early learning centres—meeting children and families in places they already know and trust.

Removing Barriers, One Visit at a Time

For many whānau, accessing health services can be challenging. Transport, time, cost, and unfamiliar clinical environments can all create barriers, especially for families already juggling a lot.

Mobile clinics help remove those barriers by delivering care on site. Health checks, advice and follow up support happen right alongside everyday centre routines, with minimal disruption and plenty of reassurance for tamariki and caregivers alike. Centre staff are kept informed, consent processes are carefully followed, and information is shared respectfully and confidentially.

Most importantly, whānau feel supported—not judged—and are encouraged to ask questions and take part in their children's care.

The Impact We're Seeing

Recent mobile clinic visits have highlighted just how important this approach is. Dental checks revealed significant unmet need:

- Many children required further treatment
- One child needed a tooth extraction
- Three children had never been seen by a dental service before
- Five children received dental caps to help save teeth showing early signs of decay

Alongside treatment, parents and caregivers were supported with practical advice about sugary foods and tooth care. Every child received a toothbrush and toothpaste—small items that make a big difference to daily routines at home.

B4 School Checks, including hearing and vision screening, also showed the value of early, accessible assessment:

- Five children were referred for follow up for glue ear, with possible grommet procedures identified



Catching these issues early helps prevent longer term impacts on learning, speech and social development. Encouragingly, all children showed strong learning progress, with confident shape and colour recognition, name identification, and some already beginning to write their names.

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Bringing Health Care to Where Children Learn continued...

Each child also received a new lunchbox, supporting healthy eating habits both at the centre and at home.

Supporting Whānau Beyond the Centre

The flexibility of mobile services means support doesn't stop at the gates. Several whānau chose to receive home visits to help catch up on immunisations—making it easier to access care in a way that works for their family.

This whānau centred approach is a key strength of mobile clinics.

Rather than asking families to fit into complex systems, the service adapts around them.

Mobile clinics reinforce the role of early learning centres as true community hubs: places where education, health and whānau support come together to give children the strongest possible start.

By delivering care early and close to home, we're helping to reduce inequities, identify issues sooner, and support long term wellbeing for tamariki and their whānau.

It's a simple idea—but the impact is powerful.

Building Confidence Through Employment Pathways

Sam's journey reflects the wider impact of Merge Café as not only a place where kai is shared, but also as a space where individuals can build confidence.



Merge Café continues to benefit from the commitment of volunteers who contribute their time and skills in support of the kaupapa. One such example is Sam, who joined Merge Café through Ihi Ora, a clinical mental health service that supports individuals into employment opportunities.

Over the past year, Sam has volunteered regularly, becoming a valued member of the Merge community. With the support and guidance of the Front of House Manager, Sam has been developing her skills as a barista, building both confidence and capability through consistent practice and engagement with customers.

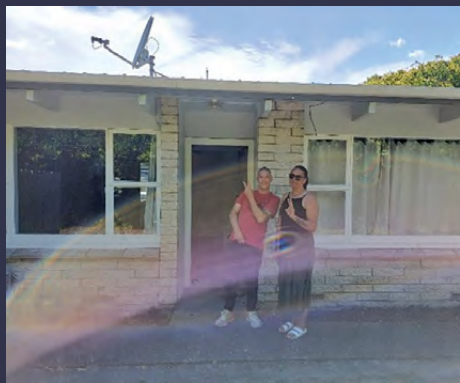
Sam's growth has been evident in the way she connects with the community and contributes positively to the welcoming environment that Merge is known for. More recently, Sam was offered casual

employment as a barista and has taken up this opportunity with enthusiasm, providing cover while Jonathan has been on leave.

Sam's journey reflects the wider impact of Merge as not only a place where kai is shared, but also as a space where individuals can build confidence, develop practical skills, and access pathways into employment. We are pleased to be able to support opportunities that strengthen both individual wellbeing and community participation.

New Year, New Job, New Home

Sometimes, big life changes begin with small, unexpected moments. For Harley, one of those moments came in the lead-up to Christmas.



It was a powerful milestone—one that reflected not only gaining a job, but rebuilding belief in himself and his future.

In December, Harley volunteered his time at the Community Christmas Lunch for Families, helping to prepare kai at the local marae. It was a busy, welcoming day filled with conversations, laughter and shared purpose. While working alongside other volunteers, Harley found himself talking about his hopes for the new year—one of them being a return to paid work.

That simple kōrero opened a door.

Another volunteer mentioned that their wife was managing a new gym due to open soon and was looking for staff. Contact details were exchanged, a meeting was arranged, and before long Harley was sitting in an interview.

Not long after, he received the news he'd been hoping for.

Back Into Work

On 5 January 2026, Harley signed his employment contract and began work the very same day, securing part-time casual employment. He proudly shared the news with staff, speaking with excitement and confidence about being back in the workforce.

It was a powerful milestone—one that reflected not only gaining a job, but rebuilding belief in himself and his future.

Working Toward a Long-Term Goal

Since joining the Lifewise Supported Housing Pathway in Rotorua, Harley has shown real commitment to his goals. From the start, his long-term focus has been clear: securing stable, long-term housing as the final step toward independent living.

Along the way, Harley has worked closely with staff, navigating challenges with resilience and determination.

While the journey hasn't always been easy, each step has strengthened his confidence, skills and readiness for what comes next.

A Place to Call Home

Through strong partnership with Airedale Property (APT), a suitable home was recently identified. When the call came that a property was ready to view, staff supported Harley to prepare, answering questions and walking alongside him through the process.

Harley attended the viewing with APT Property Manager and his Supported Housing Pathway keyworker. He immediately felt positive about the property and made the decision to accept it and is now enjoying an independent life in his own home.

Looking Ahead

From volunteering in the community, to starting a new job, to securing long-term housing, Harley's story is one of perseverance, connection and growth. Each achievement has built on the last, showing what's possible when the right support is in place and people are given the space to move forward at their own pace.

As Harley steps into independent living, we celebrate how far he's come and acknowledge the challenges he's overcome. We wish him every success as he begins this exciting new chapter.

Honouring Whānau Strength:

What the Mana Whānau Evaluation Tells Us

At Lifewise, we believe that when whānau are supported with dignity, trust and the right resources, lasting change is possible. A recently completed independent evaluation of **Mana Whānau** reinforces this belief—showing the powerful difference this kaupapa continues to make in the lives of tamariki and their families.

Mana Whānau was designed to do something different. Instead of removing children from their homes, the programme works intensively alongside whānau to reduce stress, build parenting confidence, and keep tamariki safe and connected within their own families and communities.

A Different Kind of Support

The evaluation found that what sets Mana Whānau apart is not just what is done, but how it is done. Support happens in whānau homes, at times that work for families, and at a pace set by them. Kaimahi walk alongside parents day and night, during the everyday moments that matter most—mornings, mealtimes, and bedtimes.

Whānau consistently described the programme as non judgemental, practical and deeply respectful. Many spoke about the relief of finally receiving “helpful help”—support that eased immediate pressures before asking families to focus on longer term change.

One parent shared that before Mana Whānau, life felt overwhelming and chaotic. Having someone there to help stabilise housing, sort out food, establish routines, and advocate alongside them created the breathing space they needed to start believing change was possible.

Keeping Tamariki Where They Belong

The outcomes from the evaluation are both encouraging and heartening. Almost all tamariki whose whānau took part were able to remain safely in their care or return home from state care. Even more importantly, these outcomes endured. Years later, the vast majority of whānau interviewed continued to care for their children safely.

Behind these numbers are powerful stories of restored confidence, calmer homes, repaired relationships and renewed hope. Parents spoke about learning how to set boundaries, manage stress differently, and respond to challenging behaviour with greater confidence and compassion.

For many whānau, Mana Whānau was the first time they felt genuinely believed in.

Reducing Stress, Building Strength

A key finding of the evaluation was the importance of reducing the everyday stressors that can overwhelm families—unsafe housing, financial pressure, health needs, overcrowding, and isolation. By supporting whānau to address these pressures first, kaimahi help to create the conditions for learning, healing and growth.

From supporting families into warmer, safer homes, to advocating with schools, health providers and government agencies, Mana Whānau helped whānau navigate complex systems they had often found intimidating or exhausting. Over time, parents grew more confident in advocating for themselves and their children—both during the programme and long after it ended.

Whānau Led, Culturally Grounded

Whānau spoke strongly about the importance of the programme being whānau led and culturally grounded. Relationships built

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Honouring Whānau Strength: What the Mana Whānau Evaluation Tells Us **continued...**

on manaakitanga and whanaungatanga allowed trust to grow, particularly for families who had previously felt judged or scrutinised by services.

Many described their kaimahi as feeling more like whānau than professionals—someone who listened, showed up, and stayed beside them when things were hard. That connection mattered just as much as any practical support.

Looking Forward

The evaluation also highlighted opportunities to strengthen Mana Whānau even further—by offering support earlier, staying

connected for longer, and building more peer and community support so whānau aren't left feeling alone once intensive support ends.

What is clear is this: Mana Whānau works because it centres whānau strengths, honours lived experience, and recognises that lasting change doesn't come from ticking boxes—it comes from relationships.

As one parent put it, "I walked in with no hope and came out with a bucketful of it."

That hope belongs not just to individual whānau, but to all of us who believe that tamariki deserve to grow up safe, loved and connected to their people.

Kia Au, Kia Mau, Kia Ita Programme - Rotorua

The day dawned bright and clear, sunlight stretching across the whenua as residents involved in our mental health and addiction services and their Support Workers gathered for the next chapter of the **Kia Au, Kia Mau, Kia Ita** programme. There was a sense of anticipation in the air — a feeling that the day ahead held something special.

As the group set out, Support Workers began sharing the story of Edward Bainbridge and the history of the Methodist Mission, weaving together threads of service, resilience, and community. Their storytelling was warm, grounded, and accessible, ensuring every resident could connect with the kaupapa. One Support Worker later reflected:

"It was a beautiful sunny day — the perfect setting for learning and connecting."

When the group arrived at the monument, the atmosphere shifted. Standing in the very place where these stories unfolded brought a tangible sense of connection. Residents listened closely, asking questions, absorbing not just the facts but the spirit of the past. Another Support Worker shared:

"All the residents were absolutely wowed. You could see how much the history meant to them."

This learning became the foundation for the next step of the programme: **Ko Wai Au – Who Am I?**

Support Workers guided residents through the process with patience and encouragement, supporting them to explore their own stories, strengths, values, and hopes for the future. For many, understanding the history of service and community care helped them reflect on their own journey in a new way.

Throughout the day, residents spoke openly about how grateful they felt — for the knowledge shared, for the support they receive, and for the chance to understand the legacy of the service they are now part of. They expressed pride in creating their own identities through Ko Wai Au, recognising their growth and resilience.

To finish the day, the group participated in a cultural dress activity connected to the historical themes they had been exploring. The room filled with lightness and laughter as residents chose garments, helped each other, and stepped into a moment that brought history vividly to life. One Support Worker summed it up perfectly:

"The photo really says it all — the pride, the engagement, the sense of belonging."



By the end of the day, the group returned home tired but uplifted — not just from the sunshine, but from the learning, the connection, and the shared sense of achievement. The programme had done more than teach history; it had strengthened identity, belonging, and the relationship between residents and Support Workers.

The Kia Au, Kia Mau, Kia Ita programme continues to show that when cultural learning, storytelling, and supportive relationships come together, transformation follows — quietly, gently, and with lasting impact.

Walking Towards Improved Health and Wellbeing

Late last year, our youth housing team launched a walking club with a simple aim: to support our vulnerable rangatahi in building brighter, healthier futures. The club quickly became a place for connection and growth—with over 70% participation and an average of seven rangatahi joining each adventure.

For many, it's more than a walk; it's an opportunity to come together, meet new friends, and share fresh air, fun and laughter. Lifewise works alongside vulnerable rangatahi across Auckland, and these walks offer a safe, supportive space where young people can belong, heal and thrive.

Over ten weeks, the group walked Maungauika (North Head), summited Maungakiekie (One Tree Hill), climbed Maungawhau (Mt Eden), Te Pane o Matāho (Mangare Mountain), Totara Park, Te Kopua Kai-a-Hiku (Panmure Basin), Takarunga (Mt Victoria), Maungarei (Mt Wellington) and more. Together, they walked over 36km—each step a testament to their

determination and community spirit.

Along the way, rangatahi spent 30 hours breathing in fresh air and sharing moments of joy. Every summit was a milestone—not just in altitude climbed, but in confidence gained and relationships built.

The club continues to grow, offering hope and connection to Auckland's young people. As one rangatahi shared, "It feels good to know we're not alone. We're walking towards something better, together."

"These walks offer a safe, supportive space where young people can belong, heal and thrive."



A Journey to Stability

When Pete first connected with Housing First back in 2017, he was facing some tough challenges. Methamphetamine addiction had left him without a stable place to call home, and the path ahead seemed uncertain.

But with the support of dedicated keyworkers, Pete found the courage to keep moving forward—showing up to appointments, tackling setbacks head-on, and holding onto hope even when things got tough.

The journey wasn't easy. After being turned down for Kāinga Ora housing, Pete made

the brave decision to complete detox and rehab, determined to build a new foundation for his life. His perseverance paid off—by February 2024, he was offered a Kāinga Ora home. Over the next two years, he not only kept his tenancy stable, but took real pride in maintaining his home, passing every inspection and steadily regaining his independence.

Today, Pete stands as proof that lasting change comes from relationships, support, and believing in what's possible. He credits Housing First for helping him find stability and recovery, reminding us all that the journey to a brighter future begins with a single step—and no one has to walk it alone.

Yes! I want to help Lifewise support New Zealand's most vulnerable people

Scan the QR Code to donate now or complete the form, scan and email thankyou@lifewise.org.nz or return by freepost no.: 251632



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