

12<sup>th</sup> February 2023

## Buller Wellbeing Survey Executive Summary

### Introduction

Opinions Market Research partnered with the Buller Flood Recovery Office to conduct this research to provide insight into and measure residents current level of wellbeing, the rebuild, recovery and challenges faced by the Buller District community following a series of floods and weather events in the district.

This research was conducted among three key groups of people, aged 15 and over, living in the Buller District and the findings have been analysed and reported for each:

- **Buller District residents:** sample size 488 (includes those in the Westport and stickered)
- **Westport (Westport, Snodgrass and Carters Beach) residents:** sample size 336 (includes those who were living in Westport who were stickered)
- **Stickered residents:** those who were living in properties that were red or yellow stickered at the time of the July 2021 and/or February 2022 flooding events in the district: sample size 188

An initial exploratory qualitative key informant stage was conducted with the findings informing the quantitative research questions. The quantitative research methodology consisted of a mix of face to face, phone and online interviewing. The survey was available to complete 13 July to 6 November 2022.

The findings in this executive summary are drawn from the initial exploratory qualitative key informant interviews as well as the quantitative research findings.

### Key Findings

#### Impact of the Events on People

Both the July 2021 and February 2022 extreme weather events impacted most people living in the Buller District. The July 2021 had the most severe impact.

Within the district, the two events had most impact on those in Westport and, in particular, those in red or yellow stickered properties; 71% of Buller residents, 83% in Westport and 97% of those stickered consider themselves to have been impacted in the July 2021 event and 64%, 66% and 83% respectively, in the February 2022 event.

Life has not returned to normal for many of those affected and, accompanying this, people are experiencing a lower quality of life and higher levels of stress and anxiety. For example, participants children's levels of anxiety when it rains are highest among those stickered (44%) but this is also a common issue among children in Westport (36%) and in Buller District as a whole (30%).

There is also an increase in mental and physical health issues. These issues are reducing people's ability to cope, and they are also rippling outwards and affecting spouses/partners, children, extended whanau/friends and those in workplaces.

For some, their reduced quality of life and ability to cope is also resulting in a shift in behaviour, especially around reduced levels of physical activity (29 – 42%), putting on weight (25 – 27%), drinking more alcohol (6 – 14%), smoking more (6 – 7%), increased drug use (2%) and gambling (1 – 3%).

For some, there is a sense of loneliness and isolation. Among those in stickered properties, 48% said they see fewer people than they used to and this level is similar in Buller District as a whole (47%) and in Westport (45%). This may also, at least in part, be due to Covid.

Approximately a fifth of Buller District (20%) and Westport (19%) residents have a long-term health condition or disability that stops them from doing everyday things others can do. This proportion rises to 24% among those who were in stickered properties. These issues are more prevalent among those aged 70 and over.

Those most likely to be languishing were living in stickered properties (especially those still dealing with repairs/rebuild or without the financial means for repairs). It was also identified demographically that women (although males are more reluctant to admit to struggling and may in fact be struggling as much), Māori, those in one adult households, those renting and those living with more extended whanau/ friends than they used to were among the most likely to be struggling.

There was considerable evidence that some children are struggling; they are anxious and/or behaving poorly.

Access to health services, in particular mental health services and support, is an issue. This includes the knowledge as to how to access mental health services, their availability and being able to afford to pay.

Support services were most likely to have been accessed by those who were stickered, especially financial support (59%), housing support (26%), social services (22%) and health services (21%). Of these accessed services, areas least likely to have met peoples needs were financial support (24%) and housing support (17%). These percentages relate to people who accessed this support but did not have their needs met.

The Flood Recovery Community Hub and RAS along with other support agencies and services delivered significant help and support to the community.

In terms of support services, there is a sizable minority (most prevalent among those who were stickered) whose needs are still to be met, in particular, support with finance, housing and physical and mental health. 43% of those people stickered have financial worries, 31% have physical and 24% mental health problems, 12% have problems accessing health services and 4% have problems accessing mental health services.

Typically, especially among those stickered, mental health support (21%), help with managing house repairs/ insurance claims (19%), physical health support (17%), financial support (17%), feeling listened to and heard (17%), having someone to talk to about worries (13%) and finding somewhere suitable to live (10%) are the areas where people feel they still most need support.

### **Impact of Events on People's Homes**

At the time of the extreme weather events, over three quarters of participants owned their home.

90% of stickered homeowners had to move out of their home in either the July 2021 or February 2022 events. 88% of stickered homeowners lost irreplaceable personal belongings.

Among stickered homeowners who had to move out, 66% are living back in their homes but not all of these people have repairs completed as only 50% of stickered homeowners who had to move out have had repairs completed.

Among stickered homeowners who have not had repairs completed, 75% plan to complete the repairs but only 59% have the financial means to repair their home and 23% don't know.

At the time of the events, 94% of homeowners who were stickered had house insurance and 72% had sufficient contents insurance.

Among those renting at the time of the events, 96% of stickered renters had to move out of their home in either the July 2021 or February 2022 events. 86% of stickered renters lost irreplaceable personal belongings.

Among those who were stickered and had moved out of their rented home, over two fifths (44%) are living back in their home, a third are waiting to move back (32%) and a quarter (24%) moved permanently to another home.

Among those renting who were stickered 38% had sufficient contents insurance at the time.

### **Peoples Experience of Rebuild or Repair to Homes**

Few stickered homeowners who had to move for repairs or a rebuild described the experience as 'very easy' (7%). More than half (55%) described it as 'not at all' (24%) or 'not very easy' (31%). The reasons revolved primarily around dealing with the insurance company and the length of the process/delays as well as repair and rebuild timeframe issues and access to/ a lack of tradespeople and materials and some workmanship issues.

### **Community Services Requested**

People across the District would like more community events (40%), a centre for youth (37%), more community activities (35%) and more places to meet other people (26%), as well as a Marae (19%).

There is a high level of support for the development of a Cultural and Community Hub, with over four fifths of Buller District (82%) and Westport residents (80%) supporting the plan and 77% of those who were stickered. The Hub was described as a place for people to gather that offers support with wellbeing and education as well as access to social services and serves as an evacuation centre with showers, cooking facilities, toilets and will be a place for people to gather in emergencies.

### **Responsibility for Protecting the Community from Future Events**

There are concerns about future events and the perceived lack of action by District, Regional and Central Government agencies to address their potential impact. Across the Buller District, 81% consider it to be the District Council's responsibility to protect the community from future events, 79% the Regional Council's and 69% Central Government's and 45% the community's responsibility.

People are looking for guidance and leadership from the District, Regional and Central Government around what can be done to resolve current flooding issues in the district. Nearly all homeowners agreed that it would be good to have answers as to what is happening with flood protection measures.

There is a clear need for definitive answers from government agencies about actions that will be taken around community flood protection, people can then make informed decisions about their properties.

### **Responsibility for Protecting People's Property from Future Events**

In terms of people's property, responsibility for protecting homes, among homeowners, is seen to be a shared responsibility primarily between the District and Regional Councils, Central Government and property owners. Across the Buller District, 68% consider it to be the District Council's responsibility to protect people properties from future events, 67% the Regional Council's and 51% Central Government's. It is considered the homeowners responsibility by 67% of homeowners districtwide but this falls to 40% among those stickered, furthermore, those stickered also consider there to be higher

levels of government agency responsibility. This is at least in part because many currently do not know what they can do to protect their property.

In relation to people's homes and future events, across the District, 48% of homeowners consider there may be a risk to their home and a further 15% don't know. This rises to 57% in Westport with a further 18% who don't know and among those stickered it is as high as 86% with a further 11% don't know.

Among those who consider the home they owned to be at risk of future events 40% district wide, 28% in Westport and 23% of those stickered, feel their home can be adapted to create resilience for future events. And, 48% districtwide, 36% in Westport and 26% of those stickered consider it their responsibility to adapt their property. However, those who feel powerless to protect their home from future events consist of 54% of homeowners districtwide, 66% in Westport and 76% of those stickered. Furthermore, reflecting the need for guidance and leadership from the government agencies, 76% of homeowners districtwide, 78% of Westport residents and 76% of those stickered, think it would be good to have guidance on what to do to adapt their property.

### **Preparing the Community for Future Events**

The findings relating to future risk indicate that there is more work to be done to prepare the community for future emergency events in terms of emergency planning, including evacuation plans, and having resources to guide and support those in the community.

Across the District, 70% consider they will be supported well in a future emergency. Approximately three fifths have a plan as to where to go if they have to evacuate and have a grab bag; this drops to 49% among those who were stickered. For approximately one third of Buller District and Westport residents (34% and 36% respectively) and over two fifths (42%) of those stickered, evacuating to an evacuation centre is not considered easy, especially for those with a long-term health condition or a disability.