

12th February 2023

Buller Wellbeing Survey Summary of Key Findings

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

There is also an executive summary and a full report of research findings available.

Key Findings

Impact of Extreme Weather Events

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.

On this basis, most people in the Buller District, Westport and stickered properties consider themselves to have been impacted by both the July 2021 and February 2022 events but the extent people were affected varied between the two events.

Whilst 33% of Buller District residents, 45% of Westport and 90% of those stickered considered themselves to have been impacted 'a lot' by the July 2021 event, in February 2022, the proportion impacted 'a lot' reduced to 19% of Buller District residents, 18% of Westport and 27% of those stickered.

Those with a lower quality of life, experiencing stress and/or anxiety or feeling lonely and/or isolated, with physical and mental health issues and financial worries are more likely to have been impacted by the events.

In the exploratory qualitative research people impacted by the events described how they found their lives and work going from being organised and proactive to now being reactive and only managing to deal with day to day issues.

Quality of life/hauora

The research findings clearly indicate the extreme weather events continue to significantly impact people's quality of life, especially those who were living in stickered properties and, within this, homeowners struggling with home repairs or a rebuild.

The continued impact is increasing peoples level of stress and anxiety, and for some their sense of isolation and loneliness and this appears, in some instances, to be leading to changes in behaviour such as reduced physical exercise and putting on weight, increased alcohol, smoking and recreational drug use as well as gambling among other behavioural changes.

Quality of life/hauora is rated as at least good or higher by four fifths (82%) of Buller District residents.

However, when this picture is narrowed to just Westport residents we start to see a greater impact of the extreme weather events (77% rate their quality of life as at least good) and again, even more so, when we look at those who were in properties that were red or yellow stickered (61% rate it as at least good), with 19% rate their quality of life as poor or extremely poor.

Ability to Cope

People who were in stickered properties are the least likely to be coping. A third of them state they are not coping and this level may be higher. This extended out also to those around them; their partners, children aged under 18, extended family/whanau and work colleagues.

Excluding those who responded not applicable or did not state an opinion, a third (33%) of those in stickered properties said their current state is to be coping 'not very' or 'not at all well'. And, approximately two fifths (39%) said the same of their spouse or partner, approximately a fifth (19%) said their children under 18 are coping 'not very' or 'not at all well' and this broadened to 28% of extended family/ whanau and 21% of workplace colleagues.

In general, approximately one seventh of those in the Buller District, and in Westport, said they are not coping very or at all well indicating these are, to some extent, district wide issues.

Those rating theirs and others ability to cope lower are demographically more likely to be female, Māori and those in one adult households. They also often have a lower quality of life and are experiencing higher levels of stress, anxiety, loneliness and isolation. Those experiencing stress and anxiety most or all of the time are also less likely to do physical exercise, likely to have put on weight, to drink more alcohol and smoke more tobacco.

In the exploratory qualitative research it was identified that at least some children are struggling (as are their parents and caregivers).

Some children are not able to articulate their problems, as a result this is translating into physical aggression as a way to deal with the stress of the situation. Some children are also exhibiting more anxiety based behaviours, although some of these are related to Covid too, this has led to, for example, some children becoming withdrawn or anxious and some not going to school.

Feelings of Stress/Anxiety and Loneliness/Isolation

These feelings, especially stress and anxiety, are all higher among those in stickered properties compared with those in Westport in general.

However, they are also higher in Westport compared to the wider Buller District.

Health Conditions & GP and Mental Health Service Accessibility

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.

Wait times to see GPs vary significantly between people.

It was identified in the exploratory qualitative research that there are significant issues with access to mental health services, including access to counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists.

This issue is threefold, firstly knowing how to access mental health services, secondly having practitioners available on the Coast and, thirdly, being able to afford these services. As a result there are a number of people who have a need for mental health service support who are not receiving it. Some of these people have ongoing issues and others have issues brought about by their circumstances resulting from the extreme weather events.

Attitudes and Behaviours Relating to Events:

Sense of Community

Most feel there is a good sense of community where they live.

Of note, this is lower in Westport (82%) than in Buller District (85%) and lower again among those stickered (77%).

Connection to Culture and Spirituality

Among those responding, few feel a stronger connection to their culture or spirituality since the events.

However, Māori and other non-European ethnicities are among those most likely to feel more connected to their culture since the events.

Supporting Others to Recover

Most claim to have helped others in the community to recover.

Supporting others is most prevalent among those living in Westport (79%) and is lower among those in Buller District (72%) and those in stickered homes (65%).

Adapting to a New Way of Living

Some have adapted to a new way of living but there are still those who have not adapted for a range of reasons.

Among those who were living in stickered properties, 57% said they have adapted to a new way of living and 28% said they hadn't yet adapted.

Home Not Feeling the Same as It Used To

It is common for people to say their home feels different from how it used to feel.

It is most common among those who were stickered (61%) to say their home feels different but it is also evident among those in Westport (38%) and in the Buller District (28%). Please note, those who were stickered are included in the Westport and Buller samples too which, at least in part, explains this finding.

Family Life Back to Normal Routine

There is evidence of considerable disruption to normal routines continuing across the district, and especially for stickered home people.

Some 20% in the Buller District as a whole, 26% in Westport and 46% of those stickered feel their family's normal routine had not been re-established.

Red or Orange Weather Warning

Many across the district worry if there is a red or orange weather warning.

This level of worry is highest among those in stickered homes (82%) but is also common among those in Westport (69%) and in Buller District as a whole (59%).

Being Isolated or Cut off in a Major Event

Being isolated or cut off in a major event is a common worry across the district.

It is of most concern to those who were stickered (67%) as well as to Westport residents (57%) but also common among the wider Buller District population (47%).

Children are Anxious When it Rains

Many children are anxious when it rains.

This level of anxiety is highest among children in stickered homes (44%) but is also common among children in Westport (36%) and in Buller District as a whole (30%).

Children Struggling

There is evidence that people feel their children are struggling.

Evidence of children struggling applies across the district (14%) but most of all in Westport (19%) and especially among those stickered (32%).

The fact that a number of children are struggling was identified as an issue in the exploratory qualitative research. It was identified to primarily relate to the children's experience during the events and afterwards with the disruption to their normal routines and to schooling and, importantly also, due to the impact and ongoing impact of the events on themselves and their parents/caregivers and other important adults in these children's lives.

See Fewer People than I Used To

In all locations across the district, almost half see fewer people than they used to, most likely due to Covid.

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%).

It appears Covid may have had the biggest impact in this respect given this reduction is evident across all geographical areas in the district.

WHO-5 Analysis

A WHO-5 score below 13 indicates poor wellbeing, of concern 47% of stickered people, 33% of Westport and 27% district wide rate themselves as having a score of below 13.

These people are more likely to be female (although males who are struggling are more reluctant to say), living in an urban area and in Westport Ward and to have been impacted a lot by the extreme weather events, particularly the July 2021 event. They are also likely to be homeowners without the financial means to repair their home.

Aligned with a lower WHO-5 score, these people typically also have a lower overall quality of life, are experiencing stress, anxiety, loneliness, isolation, worry about their financial situation and have physical and mental health issues, worry about Covid and have problems accessing physical and mental health services.

Since the events, they typically do less physical exercise, have put on weight, and some also smoke more. They are more likely to live with more extended whanau/ friends.

Type & Level of Issues Experienced

Financial and health related worries are common across the district and are greatest among those stickered.

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.

Those who have problems accessing health or mental health services are also more likely to have a lower quality of life and to feel lonely or isolated, be experiencing stress that has a negative impact or be feeling anxious. Those who worry about Covid are more likely to have a lower WHO-5 score and to be stressed or feeling anxious.

Those who were stickered are a little less likely than others in the district to worry about Covid, possibly because they have other more pressing issues they are dealing with.

Behaviours since the Events

Some people are doing less physical exercise (29 – 42%), putting on weight (25 – 27%) and drinking more alcohol (6 – 14%), smoking more (6 – 7%), taking more recreational drugs (2%) and gambling more (1 – 3%). Living with extended whanau/friends are more prevalent since the events.

These behaviours are more evident among those in stickered homes and also among some Māori and those renting their home at the time of the events.

Affordability of Living

Approximately 5 – 10% don't usually have enough money for each of the following: go to the doctor, buy clothes to keep warm, pay for electricity, buy the kind of food they like to eat, live in a house with only the people they want to live with, keep the house warm when it is cold, pay house and contents insurance, and pay rates.

Approximately 15 – 17% don't usually have enough money to see a counsellor or a psychologist.

Māori and those renting are often among those struggling the most to afford many of these services/ items.

Rising prices were identified to be a very real issue in the exploratory qualitative research, especially for those already struggling financially to afford necessities.

Items people most often go without are the kind of food they like to eat, clothing, seeing a counsellor or psychologist or a doctor and keeping the house warm when it's cold.

The people most frequently going without are more likely to have been impacted 'a lot' by the events, Māori and those renting.

Those who do not usually have enough money to afford living expenses are more likely to have a lower overall quality of life, lower WHO-5 scores, and to experience stress or feel anxious and feel lonely or isolated.

Support Networks

Supporting themselves (88% in Buller District, 84% in Westport and 81% among those in stickered properties) is the most common form of support people feel they received.

This is followed by support from a spouse/partner (69% in Buller District, 67% in Westport and 57% among those in stickered properties) and whānau/extended family (67% in Buller District and in Westport and 60% among those in stickered properties).

At a slightly lower level is support from the community (59% in Buller District, 57% in Westport and 56% among those in stickered properties) and workplaces (50% in Buller District, 55% in Westport and 39% among those in stickered properties).

Support agencies were found to provide support to 15 and 18% of Buller District and Westport residents, respectively, and to 28% of those who had been stickered.

Support from children under 18 was provided to approximately a fifth of people (22% in Buller District, 20% in Westport and 17% among those in stickered properties)

Just under a fifth received support through cultural (18% in Buller District and in Westport and 12% among those in stickered properties) and spiritual connections (17% in Buller District, 18% in Westport and 16% among those in stickered properties).

Areas Where Support Accessed

Those who had been stickered are significantly more likely to have accessed financial (59%) and housing support (26%), health (21%) and social services (22%) as well as to have used The Flood Recovery Community Hub and they are also more likely to have received support around insurance/from RAS.

In the exploratory qualitative research, people spoke highly of a number of support agencies and services and they clearly delivered significant help and support to the community for example, The Flood Recovery Community Hub and Navigators as well as RAS. It was the knowledge, skills and support that The Flood Recovery Community Hub and RAS and other support agencies and services offered that was so valuable for people.

Homeowners struggled to be project managers themselves and RAS provided good practical support and were helpful to people dealing with insurance issues. Having a connection to RAS meant that insurance companies typically moved faster to resolve issues.

It was identified in the exploratory qualitative research that there were a number of smaller community organisations and services which may not have been accessed broadly across the community but they were certainly of significant value to most of those who connected to them and used their services.

In terms of the support services meeting needs, it was found that there is a sizable minority who accessed services but whose needs were not met, in particular, financial (24 – 27%) and housing support (17 – 23%) and health services (9 – 20%) needs.

Those utilising support services typically have a lower quality of life and WHO-5 score and are also more likely to be experiencing stress, anxiety, loneliness and isolation.

Areas Where Support Still Needed

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.

Homelessness was identified in the exploratory qualitative research to be a very real concern for some across the district, either because they can't afford anywhere to live or because there isn't anywhere available to live.

Availability of Community Services

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

Attitudes Towards Cultural and Community Hub Development Plan

The Cultural and Community 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.

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.

10% of Buller District residents as a whole do not support the idea, this proportion is higher among those who were stickered at 14%. Some people 7 – 9% want more information to state an opinion.

Those who are unsupportive often claim the money could better be spent on flood protection, fixing problems and infrastructure, are concerned about the cost of the Cultural and Community Hub or don't consider it to be needed.

Attitudes Towards Communication and Engagement

The findings from among all Buller District residents as to the performance of district, regional and central government agencies' communication and engagement identify a shortfall in these agencies meeting requirements for many.

People are looking for guidance and leadership from these agencies around what can be done to resolve current issues and for future flood protection and what people can do to help themselves.

There is a strong need for definitive answers from the agencies about what is going to happen around flood protection so that people can make informed decisions.

The exploratory qualitative research identified that there is a significant opportunity for district, regional and central government agencies to improve their communication and to engage with residents.

Residents requested to be better informed and have greater insight and understanding of the issues and challenges around protecting their homes and the community against the impact of future extreme weather events.

In addition, there is a need to communicate the actions agencies will be taking to address these future risks.

Desired means of communication are wide ranging demonstrating that different types of media fulfil differing demographic needs. Preferred media use was also found in the qualitative research to vary according to the type of communication and engagement required.

Desired means of communication commonly included newspapers and online news, social media, especially Facebook, local radio stations, agency websites, community meetings and the Buller Flood Recovery Hub.

Quality of Home

Most are satisfied with the quality of their home, although those who were stickered expressed the least satisfaction.

12% of those who were stickered expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of their home.

The reasons for dissatisfaction related to warmth, moisture levels, weathertightness, heating and insulation issues.

Some who had to move out of their homes due to the flooding events, are also still living in a caravan, sleepout or backpackers.

Among those who were stickered, there is also dissatisfaction around the fact that their home they were living in hasn't yet been repaired.

Those dissatisfied with the quality of their home are more likely to have a lower overall quality of life, lower WHO-5 score and to experience stress or to feel anxious and to feel lonely or isolated.

Access to Transport

Most are satisfied with their access to transport to daily activities.

The most common reasons for dissatisfaction are the lack of access to public transport and the cost of transport.

Home Ownership at the Time of the Extreme Weather Events

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

Homeowners' Experience of Events

The July 2021 event, more so than the February 2022 event, had the greatest impact on homeowners in terms of their home being stickered, having to move out and losing irreplaceable personal belongings.

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 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.

Experience of Rebuild or Repair for Homeowners

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.

Finding somewhere else to live was hard for 42% of stickered homeowners who moved out of their home with a lack of options or suitable options and having pets being the primary issues.

Among homeowners who were stickered and had moved out of their home, being able to afford somewhere else to live was an issue for 29%.

Among those living in TAS accommodation this was not always easy with issues primarily revolving around quality and suitability. Some people have received bills that they were not expecting and did not have the funds to pay and this created a lot of anxiety.

House and Contents Insurance

Over 90% of homeowners have house insurance and over two thirds have sufficient contents insurance.

House insurance premiums have increased for almost two thirds of homeowners in the last year; 60% in Buller District, 63% in Westport and 64% of those stickered have experienced an increase.

The claim excess has increased for 28% in Buller District, 33% in Westport and 38% of those in stickered properties.

Of note, a sizable portion don't know if insurance premiums or claim excesses have increased or not.

Renters' Experience of Events

Over 60% of those people renting had a private landlord at the time of the events and approximately 10% a local council, housing trust, Housing NZ or other social housing provider home. Over one fifth don't know or state the nature of the provider.

As with homeowners it was the first, July 2021, event that impacted renters the most in terms of their home being stickered, having to move out and losing irreplaceable personal belongings.

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 who were stickered and renting and who have moved back or are waiting to move back into their home, 67% have had the repairs completed and 29% haven't but there are plans to repair their home.

Among those renting who had to move home, finding a rental property was typically difficult primarily due to nothing or nothing suitable being available.

Knowing when they could move back was also difficult for most.

Living in TAS accommodation was difficult for many living in this type of accommodation primarily due to the lack or type of facilities available.

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

Across in Buller District, it was identified that 27% of renters have sufficient contents insurance.

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 although among those who were stickered, displaying their sense of powerlessness and the need for the Councils/ Government to address the issues, this dropped to 19%.

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 who feel their home maybe at risk of future events (88% - 95%) agreed that it would be good to have answers as to what is happening with flood protection measures.

In the exploratory qualitative research, many pinned the solution to the future problem on the Council building a flood wall and/or dredging the river. With this not happening they viewed the Council as not fulfilling their duties and putting the community at risk unnecessarily. Many people consider the Council to have the ability and want the Council to fix the flood risk problem.

There is a strong need for definitive answers from government agencies about what action will be taken around flood protection for the community, this will also enable people to make informed decisions about their properties.

Responsibility for Protecting People's Property from Future Events

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.

Homeowners of stickered properties are more likely than renters to consider there to be future risk to their home.

Peoples stress and anxiety about the future primarily related to their home being flooded or impacted so that they lose personal belongings, not being able to live in their home nor find or afford somewhere else to live.

Also of concern to homeowners is the impact of the situation on their ability to sell their home and its value. Some, especially those who are paying large mortgages (exacerbated by the reduced value of their property, higher interest rates, increased insurance premiums and claim excesses). A quarter question whether they would be best to walk away from their home but to where? These findings indicate there are significant issues that exist at many levels.

With repairs and rebuilds where there has been no increase in floor height, some people wish they had known before the repair/rebuild to raise their floor level. Although, having the funds available to do so is also an issue.

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.

Some of those with stickered properties often feel powerless to take any useful action that will protect their property or don't have the resources to act. Others consider it more of a joint responsibility between the agencies and homeowners.

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.

And 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.

Resilience in Future Events

Nearly all have access to a mobile phone.

Access to a computer is also high but lower among those who were stickered (75%).

Approximately three fifths have a plan as to where to go if they have to evacuate and have a grab bag. Having somewhere to go is lower for those who were stickered (49%).

Approximately 70% of residents in the district have any pets, this is lower among those who were stickered (59%), and of these with pets, approximately 70% have a plan for what they will do with pets if they have to evacuate.

It was identified in the exploratory qualitative research that some people are fearful of a significant earthquake whilst others don't have the current mental capacity to think about preparing for a significant earthquake.

Ease of Evacuating to an Evacuation Centre

Just over half consider it to be easy to evacuate to an evacuation centre but for approximately a third of Buller District and Westport residents (34% and 36%) and over two fifths (42%) of those stickered evacuating to an evacuation centre is not considered easy, particularly by those who have a long term health condition or disability and those with a lower quality of life rating.

Other reasons given for it not being easy primarily related to blocked roads, having pets/animals, being with others/crowds and having children.

Expected Level of Support in Future Emergency

Across the district 70% consider they will be supported well in a future emergency but this reduces to 65% among those stickered.

Just over a fifth thought they won't be well supported (21%) and this increases to over a quarter (26%) among those stickered with a further just under 10% not knowing.

The support needed spans across a number of areas including knowing what to do, where to go, how to get information and there being an evacuation plan as well as needing help with evacuating, having somewhere suitable to evacuate to and to stay, financial support, psychological/mental health support and topical for many, the need for flood prevention work.